

You stand proud, tall and indeed gargantuan before the diminutive Lilliputians, who incarcerated you and are still oppressing and tormenting millions of Nigerians...

- Gani Fawehinmi

FRANK KOKORI:

THE STRUGGLE FOR JUNE 12



FOREWORD BY FEMI FALANA

VISIT...

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FRANK KOKORI:

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FOR
JUNE 12**

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JUNE 12**



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Nigerian oil workers, the arrowhead of the democratic struggle.

And,

My beloved wife, Esther, and my children, who were my pillars and motivators in that struggle to save a bleeding nation.

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FOREWORD

In marking the 20th anniversary of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election last year, the Lagos State Chapter of the Nigerian Union of Journalists held a public lecture. On that occasion, I pleaded with Comrade Frank Ovie Kokori, who delivered the keynote address to document his historic intervention in the titanic battle for the restoration of democratic rule in Nigeria. I was relieved when he assured me that he was putting finishing touches to the manuscript of his memoir. I never heard again from Comrade Kokori, until a couple of weeks ago when he requested me to write the Foreword to his book, titled FRANK KOKORI: THE STRUGGLE FOR JUNE 12. Owing to my personal involvement in the struggle, I accepted the request unconditionally, regarding the debt of gratitude the progressive moment owes Comrade Kokori, for his selfless service to the nation and enormous contribution to the democratic struggle.

As a pupil counsel in the Comrade Alao Aka-Bashorun-led Peoples Chambers at Ebute Metta, Lagos, in the 1980s, I had known Comrade Frank Kokori at close quarters. The Law firm was handling cases for the National Union of Petroleum and Gas Workers (NUPENG) when Comrade Kokori was its General Secretary. All the efforts of the highly corrupt Ibrahim Babangida junta to take over NUPENG were rebuffed by Comrade Kokori and other leaders of the union. Owing to his incorruptibility, the union leader was highly respected in and outside the Labour movement.

Under the Trade Union Act, workers were totally prohibited from engaging in political activities. Being convinced that the demand for humane working conditions under military rule could not be divorced from the struggle for democracy, Comrade Kokori and other progressive forces in the Labour movement collectively decided to take part in the political transition programme of the General Ibrahim Babangida junta. At both the Constitution Review Committee and the Constituent Assembly, where Comrade Kokori represented the Nigeria Labour Congress, he made his mark. He was one of the Labour leaders who influenced the Labour movement to establish the Nigeria Labour Party (NLP). However, following the refusal of the junta to register the party, the NLP resolved to merge with the 'little to the right' Social Democratic Party (SDP) which sponsored Chief M.K.O Abiola, who later won the June 12, 1993 Presidential election.

The NLC condemned the annulment of the results of the election, which was adjudged 'fair and free' by local and international observers. However, Comrade Paschal Bafyau, who was the NLC President kicked against the motion of Comrade Kokori of NUPENG for a general strike. At that juncture, NUPENG decided to part ways with the NLC. Both NUPENG and the Petroleum and Gas Senior Staff Association (PENGASSAN) jointly resolved to embark on an indefinite strike if the annulment of the election was not reversed. The military regime ignored the threat and both unions paralyzed the economy. Added to the strikes were mass protests called by the human rights movement. The political crisis forced General Babangida out of power. The strikes and the mass protests continued under the Interim National Government hurriedly installed and headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan, a retired Chief Executive of UAC.

Although Comrade Kokori had confirmed Chief Abiola's commitment to fight for the actualization of the mandate, he was suspicious of the romance between him and the military oligarchy,

headed by General Sanni Abacha. He was particularly disturbed to learn that General Abacha was compiling a list of ministers, when the plan was to sack the ING for a democratically elected government headed by Chief Abiola. When General Abacha eventually removed Chief Shonekan from power, he offered Comrade Kokori a ministerial position. He, however, rejected the offer and insisted on the inauguration of Chief Abiola as the democratically elected President of the Nigeria. Comrade Kokori's bid to persuade Chief Abiola not to allow the Vice President-elect, Babagana Kingibe, Chief Ebenezer Babatope, Alhaji Lateef Jakande and other supporters of the June 12 mandate, to serve in the Abacha junta proved abortive. Comrade Kokori was proved right as Abiola's supporters betrayed and abandoned him, while the head of state, General Abacha, quickly consolidated power.

Comrade Kokori entertained doubts when Chief Abiola informed him sometime in June 1994, that he had decided to declare himself President. As far as Comrade Kokori was concerned, the declaration was coming too late. Notwithstanding his reservations, he pledged the unalloyed support of his union. As soon as the proclamation was made by Chief Abiola, NUPENG and PENGASSAN commenced an indefinite industrial action. Even though both unions and the NLC were proscribed, the strike continued. The junta made desperate moves to arrest Comrade Kokori who had then gone underground. Upon his arrest at Yaba, Lagos State, he was brutalized by security operatives who subjected him to physical assault before driving him to a detention centre.

Comrade Kokori took solace in the fact that his wife, Esther, was able to inform the press of his abduction. Soon after his abduction, the industrial action embarked upon by the oil workers collapsed. For four years thereafter, Comrade Kokori was detained at Bama prison in Borno State. His detention conditions were horrible, but his spirit was unbroken as he confronted his interrogators

with uncanny audacity. They were later forced to admire his commitment to principle in the midst of adversity. In his absence, the junta had attempted to demoralize him. In fact, the late Chief Gani Fawehinmi, SAN, and I had concluded arrangements to defend him when it was rumoured that Comrade Kokori was going to be charged with corruption and economic sabotage. But the junta dropped the idea and decided to hold him hostage, as there was no iota of evidence to press charges against him. He did not regain his liberty until on June 16, 1998, following the sudden death of the murderous dictator, General Abacha.

Even though he was subjected to mental and psychological trauma while his incarceration lasted, he did not hesitate to single out for commendation, some of the security officials who recognized that he was fighting a just cause. He is eternally thankful to them and his immediate family, who stood by him through thick and thin, and his comrades in NUPENG and PENGASSAN, as well as others in the pro-democracy and human rights movement, for sustaining the struggle which he eventually culminated in the restoration of civil rule in the country.

Comrade Kokori's account is the story of the involvement of the trade union movement in the democratic struggle. It is not the complete story, but a challenge to others who played vital roles in the struggle to fill the lacuna left in the account.

In telling his own story, Comrade Kokori could not hide his political naivety. In his relationship with the leaders of the SDP, he relied on ethnic alliances and ran to the NUPENG when he needed personal security for political support. Comrade Kokori equally allowed his personal friendship with many opportunists in the political class to influence his analysis of political events. No doubt, FRANK KOKORI: THE STRUGGLE FOR JUNE 12 is a honest historical account of the involvement of Comrade Kokori in the democratic struggle in Nigeria. In the book, the trade union leader

could not hide his contempt for Labour and political leaders who embraced opportunism in place of principle, and allowed corrupt military dictators to truncate democracy in Nigeria. However, through the book, Comrade Kokori has demonstrated the capacity of the progressive extraction of the trade union movement to liberate the country from imperialism and its local lackeys in the political and business sectors.

Femi Falana, SAN
May, 2014

PREFACE

This book is coming fourteen years behind schedule, and it has also gone through a lot of refocusing.

I am particularly happy that God has made it possible for me to put this testament in print, over fourteen years after the gates of Bama Prisons were flung open for me to go home a free man. My joy is further heightened because I am now able to tell the story of that epoch-making period, raw and bluntly, and to put in proper perspective, the heroic role of the organised Nigerian oil workers, through their trade union organisations - the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), the arrowhead of that struggle, and the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), a group that before then was not known for any radical action. PENGASSAN came on board seven days after NUPENG began the historical action and finally collaborated effectively to make the strike what it was.

Nigeria's maximum dictator, the Late General Sani Abacha, incarcerated me for leading oil workers in the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) on the country's most virulent civilian action against a military regime. When Abacha died and I regained my freedom after four years, I began making preparations to write a book, detailing my NUPENG years and my Labour and political struggles, planning to release it as soon as Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola was – as we supposed – released from detention to head the Government of National Unity. However,

Abiola did not come out alive. I was too shattered by this anticlimax of Abiola's death to piece together my thoughts, talk less of piecing together a book. And so the book project became an abandoned project. With Bashorun Abiola's death, I lost, not just the motivation and the will to write, I lost a man I thought would be my biggest admirer. However, mine was a story that must be told and so the book project had to be reignited – even if nearly a decade late.

As fate would have it, I met the then Chairman of Spectrum Publishers, Chief Joop Berkout now Chairman Safari Books Limited, at a public function in 2005, and he reminded me of the long-awaited book, which he had offered to publish in 1998. He encouraged me to document my own unique perspective on this landmark aspect of contemporary Nigerian history.

An author has the most pleasant task to thank those who have assisted him to complete his work. And here I must thank the Editorial Consultant, Felix Oboagwina, a journalist, who did a yeoman's job on the manuscript, having himself been a participant observer in some of the story I have to tell. I also thank the Publishers, Safari Books Limited, Ibadan. My wife, Esther, and our children, also deserve commendation for laying their lives, limbs, liberty and livelihood for the struggle. To a large extent, they helped me to survive those times and they also never ceased to encourage me to put pen to paper.

Although I must acknowledge that my deputies in NUPENG - Comrades Joseph Akinlaja and Elijah Okougbo - in their different books, have written a slice of what they saw NUPENG do in the June 12 struggle (they themselves having been significant participants in the battle), I must however say that they have not told half the story. So much transpired between me and key actors in the key milestones of that historical era that only a book written by me can cover. And I have unveiled some of those behind-the-scene occurrences here in my own exclusive record, covering General Sani Abacha, Bashorun

Abiola, Ambassador Baba Gana Kingibe, Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, Chief Anthony Enahoro, Comrade Kojo Agamene, Chief Felix Ibru, Senator Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Comrade Paschal Bafyau, President Olusegun Obasanjo, NADECO, OMPADEC, Chief Gani Fawehinmi, Canada, USA, Britain, USSR, NLC, NUPENG, PENGASSAN, Bama Prison, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, Chief Tony Anenih, and many issues and personalities that dominated that unforgettable era.

I cannot pretend that mine will be the last story on June 12. No way. I only hope that my book will provoke more books.

Frank Kokori
September 2006

HEROES OF DEMOCRACY

THE BIG TEN

1. Gani Fawehinmi (Chief)
2. Beko Ransome-Kuti (Dr)
3. Femi Falana (Mr.)
4. Anthony Enahoro (Chief)
5. Bola Tinubu (Senator)
6. Wole Soyinka (Prof)
7. Alani Akinrinade (General)
8. Fedrick Fasehun (Dr.)
9. Abraham Adesanya (Chief)
10. Olisa Agbakoba (Chief)



11. Adekunle Ajasin (Chief)
12. Ayo Opadokun (Chief)
13. Ayo Adebajo (Chief)
14. Bola Ige (Chief)
15. Aka Basorun (Chief)
16. Wahab Dosunmu (Chief)

17. Biyi Durojaiye (Chief)
18. Abubakar Umar (Colonel)
19. Mathew Kukah (Father)
20. Bishop Adetiloye (Bishop)
21. Sunday Mbang (Bishop)
22. Kofo Akerele Bucknor (Chief)
23. Chukwuemeka Ezefe (Chief)
24. Ndubisi Kanu (Chief)
25. Chris Ayanwui (Mrs)
26. Segun Osoba (Chief)
27. Bolaji Akinyemi (Prof)
28. John Oyegun (Chief)
29. Solanke Onasanya (Chief)
30. Ola Oni (Comrade)
31. Lam Adesina (Alhaji)
32. Olu Falae (Chief)
33. Tai Solarin (Mr.)
34. Mike Ozekhome (Mr.)
35. Ayodele Akele (Comrade)
36. Bisi Akande (Chief)
37. Abdul Oroh (Mr.)
38. Dapo Olorunyomi (Mr.)
39. Adeniji Adele (Alhaji)
40. Wale Oshun (Chief)

41. Adeyinka Adebayo (Chief)
42. Omo Omoruyi (Prof)
43. Polycarp Nwite (Senator)
44. Bamidele Aturu (Senator)
45. Chuka Ubani (Mr.)
46. Adams Oshiomole (Comrade)
47. Pat Utomi (Mr.)
48. Ebun Adegboruwa (Mr.)
49. Clement Nwankwo (Mr.)
50. Baba Omojola (Dr.)
51. Nosa Igiebor (Mr.)
52. Femi Ojudu (Mr.)
53. Dan Sulaiman (Vice Marshal)
54. Femi Aborishade (Mr.)
55. Shehu Sanni (Mallam)
56. Ralph Obiora (Chief)
57. Fred Agbeyegbe (Chief)
58. Felix Oboagwina (Mr.)
59. Bayo Onanuga (Mr.)
60. Peter Obadan (Pastor)
61. Kunle Ajibade (Mr.)
62. Tunji Abayomi (Mr.)
63. Onome Osifo-Whiskey (Mr.)
64. Bamidele Aturu (Mr.)

- 65. George Mba (Mr.)
- 66. Joe Igbokwe (Mr.)
- 67. Niran Malaulu (Mr.)
- 68. Utenta Identa (Mr.)
- 69. Soji Omotunde (Mr.)
- 70. Joseph Evah (Comrade)
- 71. Amos Akingba (Mr.)

Cadet Fighters

- 72. Festus Keyamo (Mr.)
- 73. Mike Iginni (Mr.)
- 74. Gani Adams (Mr.)
- 75. Joe Okei-Odumakin (Dr.)
- 76. Yinka Odumakin (Mr.)
- 77. Owei Lakemfa (Mr.)
- 78. Kayode Komolafe (Mr.)
- 79. Funmi Komolafe (Mrs)
- 80. Segun Maiyegun (Mr.)
- 81. Ayo Obe (Mrs.)
- 82. Tokunbo Afikuyomi (Senator)

PROLOGUE: MY DREAM

This prologue was originally prepared for my autobiography - NUPENG is My Life - but events of today in our country have forced me to abridge it to accompany this testament of our time.

I am from neither wealth nor poverty, but throughout my childhood, it was always my dream that one day, I would write the story of my life for the benefit of my country and mankind. I always thought that my life experiences would be a source of inspiration to our people. You may not believe it, that since age five I've started dreaming about service, service and greater service to my people. I thought I would contribute my quota to helping make their world a better place to live in. With a track record of achievements for my country and mankind, I wanted to leave the world a better planet than the way I met it.

During those impressionable years of my life, there were great names like Winston Churchill of Great Britain, Charles De Gaulle of France, Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Mao Tse Tung of China, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, our own Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo and Ahmadu Bello. Great men of their era, all of them won my great admiration. How I longed to be as great as any of them!

Somehow I had the feeling then, that I would not die young and that at the age of 50 I must have achieved greatness and glory. Whether I thought that my life up to 50 would be that of real struggles,

pains and glory, I may not remember now. But some five decades after the date I came into this world, I wrote the first prologue to the portrait of my life from a lonely prison cell in extremely torrid Bama, in Borno State, a town many miles away from the place of my birth.

Again, I never thought that my life, up to this stage would centre on a proletariat movement. This is so because I never planned it to be so. But if today, NUPENG, acronym of the famous National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers, has come to represent the essence of my life up till date, I am happy to accept it as one of the divine ways of God.

But during all this time, I used to wonder why there had been so much unpredictability in my life. Is an unseen power propelling my life through some divine direction? How will I know?

September 22, 1996

December 3, 1997: Letter from Gani Fawehinmi

Lagos

My Dear Frank

Solidarity,

My heart bleeds that you are still in illegal and clearly unjustified detention for no offence whatsoever, except for the conviction of your ideals, philosophy and principles for the emancipation of the Nigerian masses and the proper democratisation of the political processes.

My joy is that millions of Nigerians share and support what you stood for before you were arrested and detained. The international community also supports you. You stand proud, tall and indeed gargantuan before the diminutive Lilliputians, who incarcerated you and are still oppressing and tormenting millions of Nigerians in all parts of the country.

We pray and hope that you will regain your freedom soon if the political usurper fulfils his November 17, 1997 pledge. Millions are waiting to receive you.

The bearer is to give you N4,000.

With Highest Regard,
GANI FAWEHINMI

Thank-You Letter to Gani Fawehinmi

Bama Prisons

My Dear Gandira,

Your solidarity letter of 3rd Dec. 1997 is inspiration itself, and you remain that to the entire nation today. In fact, you are the icon of the remaining tiny endangered breed of Nigerians still outside the gates of Abacha gulag. Almighty Allah will lead you and guide you in this historic struggle till when our bleeding nation is unchained. Your last interview with Tell was fantastic. You are surprised that I managed to read it in prison?

I will continue to thank you for everything. My wife is always telling me about your efforts during her visits. Please stop dealing with anybody on my behalf, except my wife and kids whom you know. I thank you for the gift. Only N500 got to me.

Please tell F.F., the editors of the radical Press, and those tiny lots who can still stand to be counted that I salute them all.

My very warm regards to you and your family. God bless you all till we meet again.

Sincerely Yours

P.S.: After I completed this letter, somebody came along to whisper the death of Yar'Adua to me. My God, where is this leading to!!

NB

F.F. – means Femi Falana

One

KINGIBE, HAVE YOU CLEARED THIS WITH MKO?

Something I have lived to regret happened in my political experience on November 18, 1993; the day after General Sani Abacha overthrew Chief Ernest Shonekan's Interim National Government (ING). It all began when Vice President-elect, Ambassador Baba Gana Kingibe, suddenly called my cellular line. He asked me to see him at home.

"We have a very important appointment," were the words of Kingibe, the lesser partner in the Social Democratic Party (SDP) duet that on June 12, 1993 won Nigeria's presidential election (the principal being the President-elect, Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola).

Sensing the urgency in the voice of Nigeria's Vice President-in-Waiting, I had my son, Frank (Jnr.) immediately drive me through the roughly 10 kilometres between my place in Surulere and Kingibe's Victoria Island home, both in Lagos. Kingibe and I had together been pioneer members of the SDP National Executive in 1990. Kanuri-born Kingibe had been the Chairman, and I, the Financial Secretary. Time and space quickly drew us close to each other. He particularly cherished my principled Labour-directed leanings, although he got upset sometimes when pure principle cast me against him on some issues within the Executive. But I guess he always cherished my objectivity. When he decided to contest the

SDP presidential primaries in Jos, March 1993, Kingibe made me part of his campaign inner caucus and kitchen cabinet. He lost that contest to Abiola. But when the wealthy businessman chose him as his running mate, Kingibe dragged me into his own camp of the presidential campaign. As far as I could see, with the yet undeclared victory of June 12, I was part of the Abiola-Kingibe government-in-waiting, until General Babangida upturned Nigerians' expectations by suspending the result. As General Secretary of the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), I had led oil workers on a strike that paralysed the nation after which Abacha's palace coup was staged in 1993.

Going by what we learnt, General Abacha had chased out Chief Shonekan and the Interim National Government on November 17, 1993 in order to restore Abiola's mandate. Thus, I had no doubt that Kingibe's fateful phone call on the day in question would be in furtherance of that pro-Abiola objective. I could not have been more wrong.

When I arrived at Victoria Island, Kingibe was absent from home but he left a message that someone should lead me to where he was. With my son driving, my car trailed another car that led us from Kingibe's Victoria Island residence to somewhere in Ikoyi. The compound we drove into had a perceptively heavy military presence right from the street. I met Kingibe there and he was pleased to see me. With him were Brigadier General Ibrahim Gumel (an Abacha confidante who later became Defence and Security Adviser) and Brigadier General Aboki Abdullahi (Director of Military Intelligence), with two Permanent Secretaries, Alhaji Hashim (Ministry of Labour) and Alhaji Hamman Tukur (Ministry of Petroleum Resources). From all indications, they have serious business at hand and after observing them for a brief moment, it became obvious to me that they were working on the composition of General Abacha's cabinet. Soon after, General Abdullahi

disappeared into an inner chamber, returning some moments later to say General Abacha wanted me on a phone in one of the private rooms. I went in and picked up the receiver. It was Abacha alright.

“Hello.” I spoke into the receiver.

“Hello Frank,” he said cheerily.

“How are you, Sir?” I said.

“Oh, it is good hearing from you, Frank.”

After the pleasantries, we just spoke generally, petty talk mostly; nothing serious. I finished with Abacha and went back to Kingibe. I pulled his hand and led him outside.

“What is this meeting for?”

He said, “Don’t worry. Don’t worry. We are trying to talk.”

Names were being mentioned, and I could see that Kingibe had his name penciled down for External Affairs Minister and Member of the Provisional Ruling Council. He later shared that exclusive privilege with Chief Alex Ibru, Publisher of The Guardian, nominated for Internal Affairs. (Had I also been assigned a portfolio?) This I did not care to ask.

To me, it all looked alarming. The 1993 struggle to revalidate June 12 was just being consummated. I did not feel comfortable with the unfolding scenario and expressed my discomfiture to Kingibe. First of all, if Abacha intended to run a brief transitional government solely to right the wrong of Babangida’s annulment of what even the usually biased Western nations called the fairest and the freest election, why were these people in Ikoyi now working out what looked to me like a full-fledged cabinet? If the Abacha government planned a brief tenure, what did it mean awarding Kingibe a ministerial position? If Kingibe indeed regarded himself as Nigeria’s VP-in-waiting, why should he swap that status for a dismally lower position? On June 12, Kingibe had won the election to be the Nation’s Vice President, how could he now settle for the post of an ordinary Minister? To me, it looked like a colossal, graceless

demotion. Perhaps Kingibe was less optimistic than the rest of us, or he had a dim view of his being Vice President. Maybe he bought the thinking of John Adams, the first Vice President of the United States, who once said of his position as second-in-command:

My country has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived.

As for myself, a ministerial position with the military did not excite me any bit. In Labour relations practice, we often talk of job satisfaction. This simple term means so much to the psyche of the workman, for therein lies the soul of his happiness and production. Throughout my three decades of wage labour, I have had opportunity to perform in various functions. I have worked as a Meter Reader cum Tariff Clerk at the Electricity Corporation of Nigeria (ECN-NEPA). I have been a salesman. I worked in NUPENG. I have served as my nation's lawmaker. Then I became a senior party officer and public functionary. Yet, nothing gives me greater pleasure than working as the obedient scribe of the oil-workers union. I cherished my position in NUPENG very much. Being minister in a military junta offered no real power; it was just the same as being a glorified civil servant, as far as I could see.

NUPENG and the civil society groups had unleashed a series of strikes and popular demonstrations that finally succeeded in pursuing Babangida and Shonekan from Aso Rock. By far, the worst damage had been done by the oil workers' efforts. As NUPENG General Secretary, I easily rated as the resistance's commander-in-chief of sorts. Taking a ministerial appointment with Abacha would rubbish the public's view of my commitment to the struggle, and give the impression that I had championed the struggle for personal gain and spoils of office. Thus, I had no interest in that cabinet list.

“When you told MKO about this, what did he say?” I asked Kingibe.

“Did you get clearance from him?”

“Abacha must have told him,” Kingibe responded.

And then Kingibe launched into arguments aimed at winning me over. According to the VP-elect, his involvement in the Abacha regime was strategic. Since the new military regime had set out to be a “provisional government,” he would find it easier to launch a campaign to revalidate June 12 from inside as a member of the government than from outside it. He also mentioned that Abiola confidants and Yoruba kinsmen such as Alhaji Lateef Jakande and Chief Ebenezer Babatope would also be picking up roles in the government. At he mentioned those names, I got more puzzled. These were staunch June 12 backers, who contributed in no small measure to creating Abiola’s victory and sustaining agitation to sustain his mandate. If this calibre of people featured on board the Abacha cabinet, perhaps Abiola indeed had a hand in it. But I seriously doubted the wisdom of their joining Abacha’s government. Suddenly, I knew just what to do. “Let us go and see MKO,” I told Kingibe.

To my knowledge, Abacha and Abiola had good rapport prior to the overthrow of the Ernest Shonekan-led Interim National Government (ING). But there was no way Abiola would now acquiesce to Kingibe joining the Abacha regime because that would have disorganised the Abiola presidential ticket. And the new regime needed Ambassador Kingibe’s civil service experience and diplomatic know-how. They needed his brain. They needed the credibility that his presence could bestow on their usurping regime. At that point, as far as I could see, Kingibe had as much as given them his consent. However, having made my acquaintance for over seven years, Kingibe by now knew that I was not interested in power at all costs.

But right there and then, I could not walk out on him and his collaborators. I had to pretend acquiescence because of the military territory in which I found myself. In fact, my hush-hush talk with Kingibe had by now raised some curious eyebrows among Abacha's inner caucus.

Kingibe himself explained it away to them, "You people know Frank; he needed some explanation from me. And I went to explain things to him."

The next day, Kingibe and I went to see Abiola. Suddenly, there showed up a side of my friend that I had not known since his days as SDP Chairman. If you understand Kingibe, you would know that he loves the klieg lights. He enjoys envisioning himself as a popular man of the people. He cherishes their chanting: "Sai, Baba!" More than anything else, this is the worst plague Kingibe suffers today: that he lost the limelight because he chose the wrong side of history. That day, as we rode from his Victoria Island home through the Third Mainland Bridge towards Abiola's place in Ikeja, I could sense my partner's discomfiture. He grew increasingly fidgety. Reason?

Abacha would announce his cabinet that afternoon at 1pm. As the hour approached, our car got hooked in some traffic jam just before we entered Alausa, the location of Lagos State's seat of government. For the pro-Abacha and anti-June 12 mob, this was hostile territory.

Kingibe said urgently, "Frank, let's get out of here."

Without realising the reason for Kingibe's discomfiture then, I replied, "Be patient, you can see the go-slow."

Finally, we got to MKO's place. Something unfortunate happened in that place, something that till today I regret. We met former Imo State Governor, Chief Sam Mbakwe and Senator Tony Adefuye, chatting with the President-elect. As soon as he sighted Kingibe entering the room, MKO announced: "Well, gentlemen, you will have to excuse me. I must have audience with my VP. We have confidential matters to discuss."

That pronouncement, made sweepingly, proved fateful. It was a blanket statement that I knew covered even me. Here was I, who had come to broker peace and forge reconciliation between this duo and I must leave them alone to feel their way around their differences. For if eminent politicians like the former Governor of old Imo State, Sam Mbakwe, and a serving Senator had been shut out from the meeting between Kingibe and MKO, then who was I to hang around them? That matter pains me till this day. However, at that point in time, I did not lose hope. I thought that maybe the duo would invite me to join them after 10 minutes of discussing with each other: then I would have a chance to broker the reconciliation that I had come to MKO's home to achieve. No doubt, MKO already knew of the offer Abacha dangled and his henchmen's willingness to accept it. If the appointment of no other personality bothered him, Kingibe's own would cause Abiola immeasurable pain. As Brutus's had done Caesar, Kingibe's stab would prove the most painful to Abiola. For without his running mate, the myth would be broken.

The Abiola-Kingibe meeting lasted the better part of two hours. I waited with baited breath, praying that they would invite me to join them. They never did. Finally, they both emerged from the inner recesses. I took one look at them and my heart broke. Both men looked so sad, and crushed.

"How did the meeting go?" I ventured to ask MKO.

"Well, well, well, there is nothing. That is life." And he reeled out one of those legendary parables he was famous for, one that bothered on disappointment and betrayal. I cannot now recall the exact proverb. Kingibe looked sad.

I was particularly sad. I felt like an Olympics runner who had prepared hard for a 100-metre dash but who, during the finals, tripped and fell at the starting bloc. I had spent the entire night in prayers and meditation on how I would reconcile the two men. Because both men had by then developed some respect for my

opinion, I had valued so much my mediatory role and suddenly, when it mattered most, I lost the chance to put in as much as a word. That was the day that the beautiful relationship between these two men went to the dogs. Throughout his political partnership with Kingibe as Presidential candidate and running mate, MKO had taken Kingibe like a younger brother. Like a son.

MKO walked us to the car as usual. But this time, things were different. For the first time, the millionaire was not his usual ebullient self. No jokes. No wisecracks. No banters. Just quietness. Between these political partners stretched a graveyard silence. It was as if either man was seeing the other off to the tomb.

Kingibe and I entered the car and it glided slowly out of the compound. All through the ride, we maintained graveyard silence. None of us could find our voice. On the ride back to Victoria Island, we heard the announcement of Abacha's cabinet on Kingibe's car radio. Kingibe got the Foreign Affairs Ministry as well as a seat in the Provisional Ruling Council, the highest government organ. By the time we arrived at Kingibe's house, we found the whole place teeming with people. I vividly remember sighting Ojo Maduekwe (Kingibe's Special Adviser in SDP). They were jubilating. As Kingibe and I came in, they began shaking his hand and slapping his back. "Congratulations!" "Congratulations!"

Bat-blind people! The insensitive well-wishers did not perceive the atmosphere within this family. Kingibe showed none of the euphoria. Even on the face of Kingibe's wife, Ireti, I could see visible traces of sadness. But the well-wishers were jubilating. The sycophants! Those used to thinking that public office translated to affluence. Finally, Kingibe could stomach their shallowness no more.

"Don't congratulate me," he almost screamed, "I don't need congratulations. I need prayers."

That statement touched me. It jolted the jubilant group from their reverie. And as if waking from a dream, the gathering suddenly went quiet. They could jubilate alright. After all, they stood to gain something from the emerging scenario.

With Kingibe gone, the chances of recovering MKO's mandate looked as remote as getting a one-winged bird to fly. But how in the first place did I, a cut-and-dried Labour activist, get involved with these fair-weather breed of humanity called politicians?

Two

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH KINGIBE AND POLITICS

Prior to the June 12 struggle, you could not really describe me as a full-time politician. My involvement in politics was part-time. NUPENG formed my full-time job, my occupation. Every other pursuit came as an aberration. NUPENG was my life.

My first taste of politics came when the General Ibrahim Babangida government co-opted me into the 44-member Constitution Review Committee from 1987 to 1988. At that time, Nigeria had 19 states. Two members represented each of the 19 states, making 38. The last 6 persons represented various interest groups, like the Nigerian Bar Association, women, Labour and business. I benefited from this latter ticket as the sole Labour representative.

We concluded that task in mid-1988. That same year, the Constituent Assembly convened and it lasted through 1989.

Along with Paschal Bafyau, I was once more nominated to represent Labour. Paschal had not become President of NLC then. He was the General Secretary of the Nigerian Union of Railwaymen. In fact, it was while we were on that assignment that he won the election to become NLC President. Compared to the CRC, the Constituent Assembly was a larger house, with each local government electing its own representative.

These two assignments were political, and my involvement with them laid the foundation for my introduction into active politics.

Both the CRC and CA assignments took place in Abuja, Federal Capital of the country. NUPENG ran its National Secretariat hundreds of kilometres away in Lagos, the nation's commercial capital. How could I cope, shuttling between two distant cities? Thankfully, I had two reliable deputies, Comrade Joseph Akinlaja and Elijah Okougbo, who held the NUPENG fort in my absence. But when the union had crucial negotiations with management of the oil industry, I would need to be present, be it in Lagos, Warri or Port Harcourt.

For me, the twin constitution-making assignment was not a tea party. I contributed to some crucial decisions, especially in relation to matters concerning Labour, the oil communities and the oil industry. At one sitting, the CRC attempted to transfer Labour matters from the Exclusive List to the Concurrent List. I kicked against this proposal furiously.

Members did not seem to understand the bedlam they would have unleashed on the country if individual states legislated on Labour matters. But I knew the whole implication. A situation wherein every state or local government would fashion its own Labour code or legislation would introduce total confusion. It would destroy the fabric of national unity. Perhaps, because I was regarded as the only Labour expert in that Constitution Review Committee, the members saw reason with me and retained Labour on the Exclusive List, making it a sole Federal subject. It remains so even today.

After these constitutional assignments, I thought I would bid good-bye to politics. For one, I wasn't a politician. Add to that the fact that I was not growing younger. My first taste of politics came at age 44, unlike unionism, whose commanding heights I had attained as early as age 37, when I became Acting General Secretary of NUPENG. In that capacity, because of the strength of the petroleum industry which I operated in and because of the clout my country

wielded in the comity of nations, I was already a well-known name in the Labour movement, both locally and internationally. However, as much as I preferred to drop out of politics, politics appeared determined to sink its fangs deeper into my destiny.

At the CA, Paschal and I with some Labour-inclined activists like Bala Takaya and Onje Gyado (who later became Deputy Governor of Nassarawa State) had toyed with an idea—that of forming a Labour Party. We felt that for a long time, the Labour movement had been sidelined in partisan politics and government. Labour leaders like Michael Imoudu, who supported the struggle for Nigerian Independence alongside the Awolowos, the Ahmadu Bellos, the Azikiwes and the Macaulays, quickly became sidelined when Independence finally came. Their fellow travelers, the professional politicians, grabbed power and quickly ditched the Labour chiefs. So we decided that this time around, Labour must be neck-deep in the politics of the coming Third Republic, just like the British Trade Union Congress (TUC). Labour should not just play the role of criticising from the sidelines, it must get really involved in partisanship and governance. The next problem was what ideology our dream party should proclaim. Although some of us had greatly fraternised with the Soviet Eastern Bloc unions, we regarded the Communist model as overly totalitarian for our African setting. My own idea was to have a Liberal Labour Party modeled after the British. There would be a demarcation between the Nigeria Labour Congress itself and the Nigeria Labour Party – just like the relationship existing between the TUC and the Labour Party in Britain.

Fortunately, Paschal had by this time become NLC President. So we used this platform to push the agenda of forming a Labour party. The idea spread like wildfire. Radical socialist comrades in the academia like Professor Eskor Toyo and Dr. Ola Oni expressed keen interest and commitment. Quickly, individuals donated the money

to fund the party. Things were not too expensive in those days. It was then that I first met Dr. Frederick Fasehun. Labour pundits who knew him were convinced that this medical doctor nursed great sympathy for Labour interests, even though he was not a full-time Labour activist. He was brought in as Interim Chairman of the party. Aided by Labour activists, Fasehun led the NLP to begin to fulfill all the requirements for registration. The quest for registration was a keen contest featuring 23 political associations. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) finally short-listed six of the aspiring political organizations, with NLP as one of them. Unexpectedly, the military government discountenanced all the applicant associations and instead announced the formation of two parties—the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). Ideologically, NRC had the definition of being “a little to the Right,” while SDP was “a little to the Left.” Fortunately for us, the philosophy of Labour unions worldwide was Leftist Socialism, so naturally, the elements in the Labour Party went Left to SDP.

As for me, as I said before, I felt tired after spending 1987 to 1989 away from my family and my union, two very dear elements in my universe. I felt enough was enough with politics.

But fate once more decided otherwise. By then, my Urhobo kinsmen appeared to have noticed me. They insisted I must represent their interests in SDP, right from the ward congresses. People like Chief Michael Adiotomre, a former Deputy General Manager Delta Steel Company, Aladja and Chief Efe Akpobi, former Deputy Registrar of Petroleum Training Institute (both of them now stalwarts of the People’s Democratic Party, (PDP), and other members of the Urhobo community in my native Ethiope Local Government in Delta State held meetings with me to convey this wish. I came from the same Ethiope Council as the former Delta State Governor, Chief James Ibori. It was later carved into two — he now hails from Ethiope West and I from Ethiope East. That was

how I participated in the ward congress of SDP, and I won. Then we advanced to the local government congress, where I became one of the five delegates nominated to represent Ethiopia at the SDP's first National Convention scheduled for the Federal Capital, Abuja.

As far as I was concerned, that would be the end. I should just go to Abuja, attend that Convention, and return to Lagos to face unionism. For me, being GS of NUPENG was big, important and satisfying. I didn't want anything else. I loved that job. Politicians should carry on with politics. So I waited for the Convention to come and pass, so I would again be free to return to full-time unionism.

However, I had miscalculated again. Politicians in Bendel State had other ideas. Of the eight principal executive positions in the party, the post of National Financial Secretary had been zoned to Bendel State. The far North had been zoned the post of Chairman. The South East had the Secretary. The Yoruba West got the Deputy Chairman. The Legal Adviser went to Cross River State and Akwa Ibom. The Treasurer went to the Middle Belt. Two Ex-Officio positions went South and North.

About three weeks to the Convention, Chief Anthony Anenih, the strong man of Bendel politics, phoned my home while I was still at work. My wife picked Anenih's call. She could not pronounce his name well. She told me, "One Chief Anani, Aninih or something phoned. He said he would phone back."

And Chief Anthony Anenih did call back later that night. He told me of the proposal of the Bendel Elders' Caucus to present me as the candidate for SDP Financial Secretary, the post zoned to Bendel State. I learnt that Chief Abel Ubeku, former Managing Director of Guinness Nigeria PLC, had equally shown interest in the position. Being famous and wealthy, Ubeku would have stood a better chance. But the Elders had told him to step down because he nurtured an aspiration to become the President of the nation. Chief Anthony Anenih was active in all these deliberations. Anenih, alongside

other former top politicians and former public office holders like General Shehu Musa Yar Adua (former Chief of General Staff) and Retired Brigadier Samuel Ogbemudia, was banned from playing politics during Babangida's transition programme. But in reality, these banned politicians remained the powers behind the so-called newbreed politicians.

As communicated to me by Anenih, the decision of the Bendel Elders' Caucus caught me by surprise. My first reaction was, "Sir, how do you expect me to go round and get two delegates from each state to endorse me? In fact, I am really not interested."

The rules specified that each nominee for any of the SDP national positions must have the endorsement of two delegates from each of the 30 states. However, Anenih convinced me that we could cross that hurdle . . . in the three remaining weeks. We went to work and I beat the deadline. How was it done? A few days later, another call came again from Chief Anenih, directing me to report in Chief Yomi Edu's house at the Victoria Island, Lagos. Arriving at Chief Edu's house, I met a small crowd of party men milling around. On inquiry, I found out that they were party men from across the country, who have already won slots as national delegates to the Abuja innuagural convention of the SDP. They were sponsored to Lagos by party bigwigs like General Shehu Yar'Adua to come and append their signatures to our electoral forms as part of the requirements for the party elections. Thus, a job that should have taken an aspirant days and stress to go round the thirty states of the country, searching for national delegates, was accomplished within some few hours in one compound. To me, that was a welcome relief.

But more surprises lay in store for me. The Bendel Elders' Caucus arrangement had been to return me "unopposed" as SDP Financial Secretary. In line with this, the Bendel SDP had met with the Yoruba SDP at the Greensprings Hotel, Ibadan, where I was presented and accepted as Bendel's consensus candidate for the post of Financial

Secretary. At that time, SDP contained a dichotomy, based on the surviving vestiges of the unregistered PSP and PFN. Ironically, I did not belong to any of the blocs because of my Labour leanings. Late General Yar'Adua, the great political engineer, sponsored PFN, while the likes of Chief Adekunle Ajasin (former Governor of Ondo State) and Alhaji Lateef Jakande (former Governor of Lagos State) championed PSP. The two cliques hardly saw eye-to-eye.

We had attended a meeting where Ajasin and Yar'Adua clashed openly at Parkview in Ikoyi. On that occasion, PSP had requested for Mohammed Arzika to be endorsed as the consensus Chairman, with other posts allocated to members of each faction without the trouble of going through a harrowing election. PSP had made the request arrogantly. Its men insinuated that their group had the capability to clear all the posts, so the chairmanship should be theirs by right, while other groups should be satisfied with the crumbs of lesser positions. Usually taciturn Yar'Adua exploded. To hell, he said; they would go to Abuja to contest all the posts.

It was under such fluid situation that we moved to Abuja for the election. I travelled to Abuja, accompanied by a few of my colleagues from NUPENG and two of my supporters from my Ethiopie Local government constituency. They all helped to paste my posters around the conference centre and delegate's hotels in Abuja. (Some few NUPENG colleagues and I sponsored my campaign. People from my constituency helped paste my posters around Abuja). Meanwhile, finding itself without any other candidate for the SDP National Executive, Labour decided to play a very big role on my behalf. Paschal, especially, exerted himself on my behalf. He went round Abuja lobbying and campaigning for me.

From all indications, my election was a *fait accompli*. But two days to D-Day, the tide suddenly turned against me in a very strange way.

It began with the public address delivered by Baba Gana Kingibe and Mohammed Arzika, the two candidates vying for the post of SDP Chairman. Of the two, Baba Gana Kingibe was the underdog. Mohammed Arzika clearly rated as the front-runner, backed by the robust might, solid organisation and experienced Second Republic politicians of his PSP faction. However, doubts began to show after the two contenders addressed delegates. In his mellifluous baritone voice, Kingibe clearly won more hearts than his opponent. The PSP camp reacted in a most devastating way that rocked my confidence. For whatever reason, the PSP camp lashed out at the Bendel delegates and branded them as pro-Yar'Adua and pro-PFN. I became a victim (I later learnt they had overheard a lone female Bendel delegate loudly extolling the oratory of Kingibe). Overnight, the PSP chieftains changed towards me. They just branded me as PFN candidate. Suddenly, from nowhere, a splinter group from Bendel raised and sponsored one Umoru Hassan, a Muslim from Bendel North, to vie against me. As if to add to the insult, PSP chieftains like Alhaji Jakande, who earlier endorsed me, fell for the yarn. They simply removed my name from their list and replaced it with Hassan. This really put me off. Ogana Lukpata from Cross River/Akwa Ibom Zone and I had our names on the PSP and PFN lists and we had been presented as the only consensus candidates by the two camps. Like me, Lukpata had shown no visible interest in any of the two factions. Now, only Lukpata remained the unopposed candidate. My post would be contested, going by PSP's malicious new listing.

PSP's behaviour struck me as strange. I was a Labour man and this they all knew. I never attended any PSP or PFN meeting. The only meetings that brought me together with chieftains of these factions were those in the home of Alade Shonubi at Parkview, Ikoyi, where all the three dominant interests in SDP – PSP, PFN, NLP – met on a common front.

Pa Ajasin chaired those meetings. But Labour – represented by Paschal, myself, Fasehun, Abdulsalam Salam of the National Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) and Sylvester Ejiofor of Civil Service Technical Union – had maintained a non-aligned posture. Other than that, I had been well involved in NLP meetings at the old Secretariat of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) at Commercial Avenue, Yaba. Thus, knowing my loud neutrality and my antecedents, no one would have expected people like Jakande and other PSP chieftains to subscribe to the removing of my name from their PSP list.

Moreover, while PFN camped its delegates in Kaduna, I lodged in Agura Hotel, Abuja, with the PSP team; the PFN delegates were camped, sponsored and transported from a common purse but I was paying my own bills. It was the mother of all ironies. As soon as I landed in Abuja, I had gone to pay homage to Arzika, right in the presence of Ayo Opadokun, and they received me very well. What else could I have done to convince the PSP folks of my neutrality? Surprisingly, when the tables turned, Opadokun changed. He became a frenzied fanatic who would have nothing to do with this “pro-PFN infidel”. I hastened to the PSP operational base at Agura Hotel to clear myself as soon as the confusion broke out. Opadokun shouted me down, “You are with them! You have crossed!”

“Won’t you even hear me, Opadokun?”

“No,” he shouted, “I don’t want to hear you!”

This outburst shocked me. Among PSP chieftains, Opadokun was very influential. He had been Director of Organisation in the leading unregistered association. In fact, at SDP’s Abuja Convention, he was virtually SDP’s General Secretary-in-Waiting or Director of Organisation-in-Waiting. And such a man had written me off! My fate looked bleak.

The PSP folks went to Abuja with the full confidence of undisputed champions, perhaps because they had led in the aborted registration exercise. But I think they grew overconfident. And by the treatment they gave me, they stepped on the toes of Labour and virtually humiliated the Bendel delegation. That night, when the Bendel leaders (they did not take me along) went trying to make PSP see reason over my case, the PSP chieftains rudely walked them out.

Faced with this turn of events, I made up my mind to return to Lagos. If politics was like this, then it was not worth my while. How could people that I trusted so much drop me without as much as consulting me or hearing me out? Just because they learnt that an inconsequential somebody from my state made a personal comment, could that justify their now grouping me with their opponents? After all, wasn't I a man of my own? Couldn't I be considered on my own merit? I called Paschal and told him I would throw in the towel and return to Lagos.

Paschal said, "No, we must fight this battle."

Clearly annoyed at PSP's snobbishness, Paschal immediately went on the warpath. He quickly put together a fire-for-fire campaign that denigrated the PSP people and ran them down as parochial. He got some of our friends to join the battle. I don't think they slept that night. Rallied by Paschal, my supporters took over the lobby of Agura, Sheraton and NICON-NOGA hotels, and vociferously spoke against PSP among the ranks of some neutral delegates who belonged to neither camp. Of course, these were a good number. Many of these neutral delegates were themselves unionists from various states. And my people convinced them to vote for me, the Labour candidate. As for myself, I refused to campaign again. I was by then totally disgusted and disinterested.

While the Bendel and Labour supporters worked silently that night, PSP supporters celebrated. They turned Abuja into a carnival ground, drumming and singing and dancing. They celebrated what

they imagined as their imminent sweeping of the contest for SDP's pioneer executive posts. No one would blame them; after all. PFN delegates were nowhere in sight.

Then election morning came and the boastful champion found out that his opponent has some muscle after all. To the chagrin of PSP, the PFN faction rolled into Abuja Sheraton in a colourful convoy, with tens of bus-loads of supporters. They made heads turn. They waved banners and bore posters and flags. Drummers. Flutists. Trumpeters.

“Sai, Baba!”

“Sai, Kingibe!”

Everyone was baffled, including the PSP supporters themselves. Where did PFN get so great a crowd? The Bendel people, who had all along regarded themselves as neutral, suddenly swayed. They quickly joined the PFN crowd. And a lot of damage too had been done by the overnight campaign against PSP by their erstwhile Labour allies, now aggrieved and alienated. That was the situation when voting started in the Banquet Hall of Sheraton. It became an easy win for Kingibe.

Even though PSP removed my name in its own final voting list passed around, almost everybody in that hall voted for me.

Even after the battle had been lost and won, PSP still refused to relent in efforts to spoil things for me. The faction encouraged my emergency opponent, Umoru Hassan, to go to court. I knew nothing about the case, until somebody brought a newspaper to me, carrying a story that I was being charged for contempt of court at Abuja. This was long after we had been sworn in as the SDP Executive and we were operating at the temporary National Secretariat in Lagos. Already, I was carrying out my functions as SDP Financial Secretary. I had received SDP's cheques (the first being N1 million) from Professor Humphrey Nwosu, the Chairman of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) who had never queried

my status. Apparently, my opponent had gone to court to claim that the election had been improperly conducted. As a matter of fact, the election had been very transparent. The number of delegates was fixed. The results were announced in the open. Winners were declared on the spot. I told Kingibe about the development.

“Have you received any summons?” Kingibe asked.

“No.”

He said, “Then, why are you worried? I am the Chairman of the party, and I have not been served the papers either. Just ignore the newspaper reports until you get the formal summons.”

So we went on. But one day, newspapers again went to town with news that I would be charged with a bench warrant. I informed Kingibe again of this new development. He told me that since neither of us had received any papers, we should simply ignore the paper reports. But at that stage, I made up my mind to appear before the Abuja court. I decided on an Abuja lawyer, since I could not on my own afford to sponsor a lawyer from Lagos all the time the case would come up for hearing. This was 1990 and Abuja was still a sleeping city. On getting to Abuja, I went to see the Chairman of the Abuja SDP who accompanied me to the court where a Justice Gumi sat over the case. Like my accuser, the Judge was a Muslim; and apparently to curry his favour, my opponent usually stormed the court with turbaned supporters clutching their worry beads. They looked like fanatics, sitting there in the court.

That time, Alhaji Abubakar Gumi’s name burnt through the country as the bastion of Islamic fundamentalism; the old man embodied Nigerian Muslims’ answer to Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran. I thought the Judge must be Gumi’s son or a relation. Would he play along with my accusers and sacrifice me on the altar of Islamic fanaticism?

Court officials called the case. I rose. And the learned Judge asked me why I had all along refused to show up in court.

“My Lord,” I said, “I have not received any summons on this case. Actually, it is out of respect for this court that I have come today, having read of the proceedings in the newspapers. Even up till this moment I have not seen any papers.”

Surprised, the Judge asked the plaintiffs, “Where have you people been serving the papers?”

They revealed they had been taking the papers to the FCT Branch of SDP.

He asked, “Where is the National Headquarters of SDP?”

“Lagos,” I answered. “SDP’s National Secretariat is in Lagos. The National Chairman is in Lagos. And I, the National Financial Secretary, am in Lagos.”

He turned to the plaintiffs, “How can you serve papers meant for the National Financial Secretary in a small office at FCT? And even the Chairman of the FCT Branch of SDP says he never got any such papers.”

The Judge nodded with pensive understanding. After some further questioning, he adjourned the matter. I again showed up at the next adjournment. The Judge wasted no time. Within a month, he ruled on the case after tongue-lashing the plaintiffs for misleading the court to make ill-advised rulings and to issue unwarranted bench warrants. The Judge upbraided them and threw out the case. Thus, I survived the antics of Umoru Hassan and his clique of pretenders.

Kingibe and his counterpart in the National Republican Convention, Chief Tom Ikimi, were powerful party chairmen. Each reigned as the Chief Executive Officer of his party and as chief accounting officers of the parties. As the National Financial Secretary of the party, I knew how money came in but I did not know how the finances of the party went. Remember that the parties were properly funded. When the Naira was hovering between ₦10 to ₦12 to a Dollar in 1990, government shared well over ₦1 billion between

the parties. That time, a brand new Peugeot Luxury car from PAN cost ₦99,000.00 (Ninety-nine Thousand Naira).

After sometime, the parties got ₦500 million each. With such sums, they could afford unimaginable luxuries and profligacy. Okada Airlines instantly renamed two of its executive jets “NRC 1” and the other “SDP 1”. Party operatives stayed in the choicest hotels in town. It proved a complete departure from previous republics (even nowadays) when parties struggle to survive, except of course the ruling parties. The parties had solid government-sponsored buildings in all the states, local governments and the Federal Capital, Abuja. That is why people called SDP and NRC government parastatals. But they were not. Truth is that when government does not intervene, you cannot form parties properly. Even the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) was founded and funded this way. For more than 50 years, the Labour unions struggled. The various Labour centres barely managed to survive. This was the case until the Murtala Muhammed/Obasanjo regimes provided for the creation of the central NLC in 1978. This made the unions and NLC very powerful. So to me, the Babangida provision for the parties was nothing new. Moreover, he was funding the parties not with his personal money but with the people’s money. But all that needed to be done was to thereafter cut the parties loose and make them independent of government control. If the nation must have good government and formidable democracy, you must build the parties. Thus the lavishing of money on SDP and NRC was a very good gesture by the government. I guess that was the handiwork of the Centre for Democratic Studies, headed by Professor Omo Omoruyi.

Early in the life of SDP, the man who contracted out himself and his Association for Better Nigeria (ABN) as the satanic mechanism for the military coup against June 12, showed early signs of his duplicity. I had reason to suspect Chief Arthur Nzeribe from the

very first time we met in person. When SDP was founded in 1990, Chief Arthur Nzeribe and Dr. Jim Nwobodo engaged in rivalry that saw them contesting for the soul of the SDP in Igboland.

As the new executive of SDP, we honoured an invitation to visit Chief Jim Nwobodo, the former Governor of Anambra State. We had sumptuous lunch at Nwobodo's impressive and sprawling abode on the outskirts of Enugu City. Quite stuffed, next day we then went to Nike Lake Hotel at another end of the city, where we had another appointment with Chief Arthur Nzeribe. We got to Nike Lake Hotel and found an array of Rolls Royce limousines of all shades littering the whole hotel complex. They all belonged to Chief Nzeribe. Anyone would feel at once impressed and intimidated about such a brazen display of affluence by Nzeribe.

We entered into the scheduled conference with the controversial millionaire politician. Telling us that he recognised the dire financial standing of the new party, Nzeribe announced that he had volunteered a monthly donation of ₦500.000 to SDP. His declaration practically brought the whole roof down, with the party leaders breaking into a noisome standing ovation. When the cheers died down, I stood up to find out when and how I – as the Financial Secretary – could see Nzeribe to collect his first disbursement for lodging into the party's bank account. SDP Chairman, Ambassador Kingibe, sat between Arthur and me. Kingibe pulled at my trouser, signaling me to sit down. From the look on the faces of the other party leaders, I could see they regarded me as a spoilsport, although I could see too that a few supported my move.

“Kokori, sit down,” Kingibe whispered to me. You are too ambitious.”

Nzeribe stammered out aloud, “I... I will see the party Chairman about that.”

“No, please,” I protested, still on my feet. “If any donation is coming into the party, I as the Financial Secretary should keep the

records and lodge such sums into the party's account. That is just normal."

The combination of Kingibe's pull at my trousers, the murderous looks from a section of the party leadership and Nzeribe's non-committal words finally made me drop the subject and take my seat.

The meeting closed with Nzeribe giving each of us ₦3,000 for "bush meat," since we could not honour his dinner at Oguta. Thereafter, we waited in vain for the monthly ₦500,000 Nzeribe promised central SDP. The donation never came.

Internally, SDP was run in a highly democratic manner. But we had a problem that lingered throughout the life-span of the party. The PSP versus PFN divide. The problem continuously bedeviled the party, although there was a delicate balancing of forces in the National Executive where PFN controlled a marginal majority. I remained the only Labour man. But as Chairman, Kingibe proved the quintessential technocrat and his knowledge of government and the civil service gave SDP an edge over NRC. Even then, Samuel Adeyemi, Exco members like Sule Lamido, Gbolade Osinowo, Ishola Filani, Alexis Anielo Kashim Ibrahim and I always put him on the spot; we remained very vocal. There was no permanent friend and enemy in the place. On important issues, the PSP-PFN palaver did not play up. But it did in the gubernatorial primaries of 1991.

This division especially came to play when we handled the gubernatorial primaries disputes in states like Adamawa, Lagos and Kano. Then my neutrality proved valuable, especially when in 1991, I was posted out as Administrator of SDP Osun and Oyo states, newly created from the usually volatile old Oyo State. I went there to run the primaries for the two new states. The defunct Chairman of the old Oyo State, Alhaji Gunju Adesakin, did not like it one bit, feeling that he should at least retain one half of the old state, while the other would have an Administrator conduct elections for a new leadership. But the SDP Exco decided otherwise and posted

me there. Although we had been friends on the SDP Executive, Adesakin told me I should not venture into the state to implement my assignment. His anger was understandable. His empire was being taken away from him for as Chairman of Oyo SDP, he had been a member of the National Exco, and now he had suddenly lost that status. He told me openly at the Exco meeting that if I came to Oyo State, I would be taken back in a coffin.

“Don’t ever come to Oyo State. You are not welcome!” Adesakin declared. He had the house roaring with laughter at this open threat.

“You must be joking!” I fired back.

However, I took Adesakin’s threat seriously and I made my own security arrangements. For me, Ibadan was familiar terrain. It housed the headquarters of NUPENG’s Western Zone. Thus, apart from getting protection from the law-enforcement agencies, I could as well rely on NUPENG’s ‘Apata Boys,’ members of my union who would protect me like an egg. I informed these NUPENG members in Ibadan of my assignment and requested them to stand by to give me protection.

Yet, it was a NEC decision that posted us as administrators to those states carved into two by the Military government of General Ibrahim Babangida. As in SDP so it was in NRC. Both parties sent administrators to states affected and newly created by the restructuring of August 27, 1991, including: Abia that was carved out of Imo State; Adamawa (from Gongola State); Anambra (from the former and larger Anambra whose capital was Enugu); Delta (from defunct Bendel State whose capital was Benin); Edo (from defunct Bendel State); Enugu (from former and larger Anambra); Ebonyi (from former Anambra State); Jigawa (from Kano State); Kebbi (out of Sokoto State); Kogi (from Kwara); Osun (carved out of the old Oyo State) and Taraba (from defunct Gongola State).

SDP in Kogi and Kwara had Prince Adeyemi as Administrator. But the Kogi-Kwara axis proved a veritable battlefield that nearly consumed the SDP Administrator. Unknown assailants working with one of the contenders bathed Adeyemi with acid.

We also had a turbulent situation on our hands in the Kano-Jigawa axis. Kano had given birth to Jigawa in the creation of new states. In the course of time, I was drawn into the Kano affair. The irrepressible Hajia Azumi Bebeji had the ambition to become Deputy Governor in Kano State and she approached Paschal and me on the matter. Up till then, she had been a female Labour activist, operating from the National Union of Banks, Insurance and Financial Institutions Employees (NUBIFIE). Now she heavily relied on us to convince Mallam Sule Lamido, the acclaimed front-runner for the SDP in Kano State, to adopt her as his running mate. Paschal characteristically assured her that the matter was already settled with Sule.

However, when I met Sule Lamido later it was a different story. He maintained that he and Paschal never settled anything on Hajia Azumi. When I piled pressure on him to pick her as his running mate, he emphatically disagreed, insisting that such an arrangement would not work in contemporary Kano with its male-dominated Islamic tradition. After much pressure, he agreed to make Azumi a Commissioner in his cabinet, should SDP win in the state. What happened thereafter will take too much space to recount. Sule could not reach his goal. Azumi crossed carpet to the conservative NRC that won the governorship and she got her commissionership.

While I was leaving for Oyo, Kingibe called me and said: "I know you are a very independent-minded person. You are very neutral. But as you are going there, try and pay courtesy visits to Chief Bola Ige, Chief Sunday Afolabi, and Chief Lamidi Adedibu. These are people who control that area, so make sure you go and see them."

SDP leaders in the area appeared very happy to welcome me to Ibadan. But Adesakin's hostility subsisted, as his supporters looked prepared to foment trouble. I learnt they had laid siege at the best hotel in town, Premier Hotel, anticipating I would lodge there. I did not. Instead, I chose the University of Ibadan Guest House. The next morning I took a step that we usually take in trade unionism, when we envisage that a contending faction might cause trouble in a congress or an election. I went to see the Commissioner of Police and informed him of my assignment. He promised to dispatch a lorry-load of policemen to provide me security. Being that I had already put the NUPENG boys on the alert, I told the Commissioner not to bother. I finally agreed to his giving me two policemen, armed not with guns, but with teargas canisters.

On the day we moved into the Oyo State SDP Secretariat in Ibadan, a thick crowd poured into the complex. I had NUPENG men infiltrate the crowd. The crowd welcomed me very well. I found that Adesakin had locked up all the offices in the Secretariat. However, we proceeded to change those locks, and surprisingly met no resistance as Adesakin himself was nowhere in sight. We subsequently had a good meeting where I took over. Throughout my stay in Oyo, we heard rumours of people coming to invade the Secretariat, but we never budged and no single invasion took place.

I subsequently shuttled between Ibadan and Osogbo, capitals of the two states. Meanwhile, the SDP National Executive had appointed for each of the two states, a State Caretaker Committee Chairman to work with me. Chief Akande was for Oyo State, and Dr. Yemi Faroumbi for Osun State. They trusted me because they knew I was neutral and I would not take sides. Together, we ran the primaries all through the levels. We treated all cases in a free and fair manner and at the end there was no controversy as we rallied everyone round to win both states for SDP.

The assignment exposed me to the style of Chief Lamidi Adedibu, the ultimate godfather in Oyo State politics. When we were screening people for primaries, Adedibu would always put his foot down whenever matters concerned a candidate of his choice. Kolapo Ishola was his candidate for the SDP governorship and Adedibu did everything to ensure his nomination. But I ensured I ran free and fair primaries. As it turned out, I saw that Adedibu had made a wise choice as most of Ishola's rivals were in reality not on ground.

But sometimes, Adedibu let emotions run away with him. One incident sticks. We needed to run a by-election in one of the local governments. Adedibu preferred one retired Nigerian Army Major as candidate. But petitions arose against him and when we investigated we found that he had in fact, been ignominiously dismissed from the Army. Even then, Adedibu insisted I should pass the man as the bonafide SDP candidate. I tried impressing it on him that even if the ex-soldier scaled the SDP primary to become our candidate, the NRC would petition the electoral commission and have him disqualified. But the godfather failed to see reason. I stuck to my guns too. One night, Adedibu came to my lodging with one of his young wives, an educated woman, alongside Kolapo Ishola, who had become the SDP gubernatorial candidate, to push once more the case of the ex-soldier. What surprised me was that Kolapo Ishola, a university-trained Surveyor, could support Adedibu's faulty cause. However, I resisted all their pressure. The following day, I met Kolapo Ishola (who by virtue of his being elected SDP candidate now had an office at the party State Secretariat) and told him of my reservations about their previous night's lobbying.

"Mr. Kolapo Ishola, last night, I was expecting you to help me explain to Pa Adedibu why we can't risk losing the local government through presenting a bad candidate."

“You were right,” Ishola said. “You did the right thing. But it is only you who can say that to Adedibu because you don’t come from this area. I cannot say it.”

In short, Ishola was telling me he had been merely acting that night. He did not want anything to sour his own chances of becoming Governor, so he was willing to concede anything to the godfather, even against common sense. Much to Adedibu’s discomfiture, we presented another candidate, who won the council polls for SDP.

Yet, tragedy struck me at the tail-end of this laudable assignment. Having finished the Oyo-Osun assignment, I decided to heed the persistent calls of my home state. All along, SDP’s governorship candidate in my home, Delta State, Chief Felix Ibru, had complained to the SDP national leadership that as the Financial Secretary, I was the highest SDP officer from the state, yet throughout I had been missing from the home campaign. It was a valid observation. But administering Oyo-Osun for SDP had been a Herculean task that gave me no spare time. The gubernatorial elections would come up on 14th December, 1991.

My presence in Ibru’s campaign was particularly important for the party, because of the way he had emerged. When Felix Ibru became interested in the Delta gubernatorial race, he had not bothered to reach me, despite my being the most senior SDP functionary in the whole of the Bendel zone, comprising Edo and Delta states. But I suspected he reached Chief Abel Ubeku, a senior leader of the party in Delta. In fact, when we met to discuss possible aspirants for the Delta primaries, Ubeku showed unabashed support for Ibru. Before this meeting, Matthew Eshalomi, another aspirant had started lobbying me for support. My plan then was for us as the party leaders in the state to sit together and screen all the aspirants and choose the most suitable. But Ubeku would not hear of this. He unabashedly flew the flag of Felix Ibru. He may have his personal reason for thus doing, however, I flagrantly disagreed with

him on his stand. Once, I stormed out of Ubeku's house after we had a shouting match over the matter!

When the repeated primaries finally ran their course (another long story) and Chief Felix Ibru won, we met for the first time at the party's national NEC meeting, less than three weeks to the election. When Ibru arrived for his meeting with the NEC, SDP Chairman (Kingibe) directed that I – in company of another member – should privately discuss with Felix to sort out the Delta campaign plan. At the start of that meeting, Felix launched a frontal 'attack' on me, saying that I – as the most senior member of the party in the state – should have been out, giving him all the moral and psychological support he needed then for the contest. I retorted that he was unfair to me for not having the courtesy to put me in the picture about his plans. He was however pleasant in all his presentation. There and then we developed a good working rapport and strategy. Thus, my being with Ibru on the last leg of the Delta campaign would serve to further mend fences and also boost the confidence of all SDP supporters.

I concluded my four-month assignment in Ibadan on 4th December, 1991. That same day, I began to return to my home in Lagos, my plan being to see my family and NUPENG in Lagos and immediately after to proceed to my home constituency in Delta for lap-up campaigns until the elections. During the Lagos-bound journey, I sat alone at the back of my new official Peugeot car, with the driver and my political aide, Francis Usiyan, in front. Francis was brother to a family friend and Pastor of my family church. Although a native of Delta State like myself, he had been brought up in Ibadan. He knew Ibadan very well and spoke the Yoruba language fluently. He proved to be an asset in those turbulent days of my SDP Oyo assignment, when he did some intelligence and reconnaissance work for me. I had planned that we would together participate in the SDP campaign in Delta State. We were going at

between 100 and 120 kilometres per hour around the Sagamu axis at about 2pm, when the car tyre suddenly exploded. The vehicle somersaulted several times and finally came to rest in the forest. Fortunately, a mobile team of the Federal Road Safety Corps located us. The driver, Lateef Usman and I lost consciousness while my aide, Francis, died before our FRSC rescuers got us to the Sagamu General Hospital and deposited us in the Accident Ward. They saved my life. Around 8pm, I eventually regained consciousness. I found myself on a stretcher, surrounded by medical staff stitching up my injuries, amidst other accident victims.

“Where am I?”

They told me.

It was then that my mind began to replay the accident. Gone was my outer agbada garment. I had on only my sokoto trousers. I remembered that Sagamu was an SDP controlled council. Feeling in my sokoto pocket, I found one of my complimentary cards. Handing one out, I managed to whisper to the leader of the medical team, “Please take this card to the Chairman of the Sagamu Local Government.”

The council officers promptly rushed over to the hospital. Apparently, they never imagined the gravity of the accident or of my injuries and had brought beverages and other provisions for me. They returned the following morning but I was still in that half-conscious state, unaware of what had befallen my traveling companions. I managed to convey to them the need to take me to Lagos to see my personal doctor, as nobody knew I was there in Sagamu. Initially, the hospital refused. But the councilors brought an ambulance and finally convinced them to discharge me, along with the driver. They lied to me that my aide was undergoing treatment and could not be moved immediately. It was my driver who directed them to my hospital in Lagos where my personal doctor quickly alerted NUPENG, my family and SDP of the accident. He sedated

me heavily and for 10 days I drifted in and out of consciousness. According to my wife, an endless stream of well-wishers kept flocking into the hospital to see me. On the day of the gubernatorial election, December 14, I finally was able to step off the bed for the first time.

I survived. But the scars remain till today. I still bear scars from injuries I sustained then. But the greatest blow had been dealt to my hips. The car had crumpled like a box of matches and only God had prevented the mangled metal from piercing my spinal cord. I won the battle for life. But I soon got involved in another battle, one which I could have won but which nearly cost me my life.

Three

M.K.O. ABIOLA AND ME

Like most people, I only previously heard about the famous Bashorun Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola from the media and from hearsay. He was not my friend. He was not an acquaintance. To me personally, this famous man meant nothing at all. I saw M.K.O. Abiola in the flesh for the first time at the historical SDP Jos primaries of April 1993.

To many of us SDP leaders, MKO was an outsider. He declared for SDP at a late hour. He joined the presidential race rather late: around January or February 1993. So we regarded him as a stranger in the party, an opportunist who had come to reap where he had not sown. Thus, a good number of us pioneer Exco members and governors, threw our weight behind Ambassador Baba Gana Kingibe. MKO procrastinated for a long time before he entered for the race. But I later learnt the astute businessman was trying to get clearance from IBB. Only after getting IBB's final assurance that there was indeed 'a vacancy in Aso Rock' that MKO joined the race. Although a late-starter, MKO quickly built a very powerful campaign machine within SDP, well-oiled with his vast personal funds. Within a short time, his "Hope '93" took the whole country by storm. He went to Jos with this big machinery behind him.

Kingibe did not have much fund. But Kingibe had a wonderful personality. He could wake up one morning without a kobo in his

pocket and all he need do was hit town and he would return home with ₦2 million; big money at that time when the naira exchanged ₦10 to \$1. He knows people. He meets people. He persuades people. Maybe because he has served in the Intelligence wing of the Foreign Service and The Presidency, he knows foreigners and locals alike. Ironically, Kingibe liked me a lot. He trusted me and told me things he would not ordinarily share with other people. He used to tell me that he had served about five Heads of State. And he rose to the top, as a Permanent Secretary.

Kingibe had his staying power around the SDP governors and his colleagues in the pioneer SDP executive. The Option A4 electoral method stipulated by the National Electoral Commission had all the 30 states posting presidential candidates. Abiola represented Ogun State, Kingibe stood for Borno State and Alhaji Atiku Abubakar rose from Adamawa State. Along with majority of the SDP governors, we in Ambassador Kingibe's old SDP National Executive decided to stand by him till the end. We went to Jos to do just that. With our backing, Kingibe enjoyed enough strong support that saw pundits rating him in the lead with Abiola and Atiku.

In the buildup to Jos, I did something for Kingibe that really thrilled him. His caucus had met in Kano and immediately drafted me to Delta State to prepare the ground for him to address party members in the area. With only three days to the primaries, it was quite a challenge. I left immediately for Delta State. I primed the Governor, the House of Assembly and the local party leadership to receive him, after which we went on to make arrangements for a hall in Asaba, the state capital, where he would address the mass of party supporters. For those two days, I did not sleep. Then on D-Day, Kingibe came in late. But we had kept in touch through the cellular phone and he assured me he would be coming in a helicopter. I shuttled the rally site and the House of Assembly to pacify the restless legislators to wait for him. They waited till 8pm,

when Kingibe finally arrived to address them. After addressing a cheering Asaba rally that night, the Governor rounded it off with a big dinner at the Governor's Lodge in Asaba. I was really devoted to the Kingibe camp one hundred percent.

The SDP presidential primary election in Jos was organised by the government-appointed SDP Administrator, Air Vice Marshal Ishaya Shekari (rtd). Alhaja Lateefat Okunnu ran the rival National Republican Convention (NRC). These two had been appointed to run the parties after government sacked us, their elected pioneer executives.

The convention highlighted the fact that the ghost of disunity that had torn the SDP apart from birth had risen once more. However, instead of it playing out in the foundational PFN-PSP dichotomy, it had transformed into a more complex form. By this time, Kingibe had parted ways with his godfather and torn the PFN loyalty apart; a fallout of the earlier cancelled presidential primaries that had pitched Yar'Adua against the likes of Olu Falae, Lateef Jakande, Olabiyi Durojaiye and Layi Balogun. With Kingibe breaking away from his godfather, Yar'Adua, SDP in Jos featured a sharp divide that translated into the Yar'Adua Group, the Kingibe Group and the Abiola Group. Abiola had adopted much of the PSP structure, and had as well poached from both the Kingibe and Yar'Adua divisions in the PFN.

How Kingibe and Yar'Adua became enemies will always remain one of the 'Seven Wonders of Nigerian Politics'. Kingibe's ascendancy as Chairman of the party owed completely to the grace of General Yar'Adua, who almost single-handedly organised and bankrolled not only Kingibe's election, but that of the entire PFN network.

When you talk of godfathers generally, it has little to do with age. The age difference between Yar'Adua and Kingibe was not

much. But Yar'Adua had it made, economically and politically. He had been Number Two man in the country, during General Olusegun Obasanjo's reign as Military Head of State in 1976-1979. And financially, Yar'Adua was well off, with his own business empire. Kingibe rated as a brilliant fellow and efficient technocrat, but he was nowhere close to the financial heights that the godfather commanded. Kingibe willingly accepted Yar'Adua's sponsorship. And all the while, Yar'Adua, the master strategist, used Kingibe as a front to help work towards his own crowning.

But Yar'Adua simply underestimated Kingibe: the godfather underestimated human nature. The General wanted Kingibe to perpetually remain a Yar'Adua puppet, and failed to realise that Kingibe himself would grow a conflicting ambition – the godson who preferred to be king. When Kingibe finally found his wings, he extricated himself from Yar'Adua's nest. As far as I know, that explains why they parted ways.

Our executive under Kingibe had conducted presidential primaries (after Babangida suddenly opened a window that allowed erstwhile banned politicians to participate in politics), in which Yar'Adua took part. Government had cancelled the exercise on the excuse that the primaries had been heavily monetised and fraught with irregularities. However, rumours later had it that the SDP primaries had been cancelled by Babangida, based on reports by Kingibe that grievously indicted Yar'Adua and his opponents.

As SDP's National Executive, we gave no such report to the government. By this, I in no way suggest that Kingibe or anyone else could not have unilaterally submitted such a damning report. We in the SDP executive all knew that Kingibe and Tom Ikimi (NRC pioneer Chairman) had their own channels for privately meeting Babangida. Actually, Kingibe at that time had direct and quick access to the Head of State, even more than General Yar'Adua,

whom General Babangida regarded as a threat to his own political calculations. Kingibe could meet Babangida anytime for private discussions, the subject of which normally died between the two of them. Anybody who tells you that he knows what they discussed would be deceiving himself.

But Yar'Adua nursed a personal bitterness over the cancelled primaries and held this against Kingibe. Even then, Kingibe had his staying power around the SDP governors and his colleagues in the pioneer SDP executive. Along with the SDP governors, we in Ambassador Kingibe's old SDP National Executive decided to stand by him till the end. We went to Jos to do just that. With our backing, Kingibe enjoyed enough strong support that saw him ranking in the primaries as runner-up to Abiola.

And if not that the Yar'Adua camp got Abubakar Atiku to step down for Abiola in a last-minute accord, I feel confident that Kingibe would have carried the day in a primary election that dragged into 72 hours. It was tough. Gruesome. But at the end of the day, MKO won. And Kingibe did one beautiful thing. Immediately the result was announced, he accepted defeat and openly embraced MKO. For me, Kingibe's gesture did not come as a surprise. Kingibe had always been a Public Relations man to the core. I knew Kingibe had other weaknesses, but one must concede to him that he demonstrates excellent human relations.

The NRC Convention in Port Harcourt did not have this much drama. It was a near walkover for Kano-born Alhaji Bashir Tofa. And he chose South-Easterner and former Health Minister, Dr. Sylvester Ugoh, as his running mate.

However, Abiola's victory created a brand new problem for the millionaire. I guess part of the unwritten understanding that Yar'Adua had with Abiola at Jos before the General acquiesced to putting his weight behind him was that Atiku would become SDP's

Vice Presidential Candidate. SDP governors would have none of that. Their Excellencies had this strong view that Kingibe had been very useful to them (in their clinching the party's gubernatorial tickets in 1991), so to pay Kingibe back, they wanted him chosen as Abiola's running mate. But Kingibe did not fit Abiola's personal preference for a Northern Christian as his running mate.

Abiola himself, being a Southern Muslim, needed a Northern Christian to balance his ticket. As far as he was concerned, the man that best fits that bill was Paschal Bafyau, a Christian from the North-Eastern state of Adamawa and the incumbent NLC President. Apparently, Abiola may have given Paschal his word. Yar'Adua's choice, Atiku, was himself a Northern Muslim like Kingibe. But we in the SDP were not looking at things in that light. We regarded SDP as the closest thing to a socialist group. We believed in an ideology, that of social welfarism. Not religion, nor ethnicity or any other mundane considerations. Thus barraged by these pressures, Abiola clearly had enough on his plate to cause confusion.

But SDP governors had the last say. The governors told MKO that although Paschal was a Labour leader; his strength could not fly beyond NLC. Their Excellencies further argued that Paschal could not move his own kinsmen in Adamawa State to vote for MKO. As governors, they called the shots and controlled the vast resources in the various states; they were also capable of mobilising the business community and the general populace, something the NLC could hardly do with its lean resources. If he took Paschal, Abiola would be on his own, the governors threatened. But the governors said they would all work for the ticket if MKO chose Kingibe. It was blackmail. But Abiola could not discountenance such a powerful and down-to-earth lobby.

I was with members of the Kingibe Caucus in the NICON-NOGA Hotel, Abuja, on that day, when news reached us that Abiola had

nominated Kingibe as his running mate. We all rejoiced. NRC jubilated too, seeing a Muslim-Muslim ticket as a liability for SDP. They calculated that Christians would revolt (especially in the South-East; the Christian North and the Niger-Delta alienated in such a combination).

I remember one of their chiefs telling me at the hotel lobby, “Wow! You people have given us victory on a platter of gold.”

But I told him our party had surpassed such parochialism, that we were presenting our best two candidates. I reminded him that the dominant fight at Jos basically boiled down to these two candidates. Their campaigns had ignored all other aspirants and very bitterly targeted each other. Up to the primary election, both the Kingibe and Abiola camps liberally deployed virulent, no-holds-barred language against each other in their public adverts. They spared nothing in their mutual mudslinging. If they now worked together, then the party had come together to fight the general election with a united front. To us, this was the best thing to happen to SDP.

Then something happened to show me that Abiola had a heart of gold. One would have thought MKO would nurse reservations about Kingibe because the situation looked like the man had been forced on him. But the SDP Presidential candidate never held it against his running mate. Immediately Abiola announced Kingibe, you would think Kingibe had always been his first choice. He opened all his doors to Kingibe. Kingibe started going to Abiola’s home on his own and soon confided to me that they were working very well together, sharing ideas, stratagems and resources. I was happy. Kingibe himself was very happy.

Prior to Kingibe’s reemergence to political reckoning as MKO’s running mate, I had thought his defeat at Jos meant good riddance to politics for me. I was really pissed off with the face of treachery that politics had shown me. But when Abiola announced Kingibe, politics became more exciting for me. Obviously, if my

man eventually became the Vice President of the nation, that automatically put me in government; I could easily walk into his bedroom or office to discuss anything with him. Here was a man who, most times, would leave his car and join me in my own car, while his driver drove behind us.

One unforgettable attribute of Kingibe that I shall always remember relates to how he broke barriers for me and selflessly drew me into his web of eminent contacts. Kingibe introduced me to three larger-than-life and historical personalities, M.K.O. Abiola, Sani Abacha and Shehu Musa Yar'Adua.

In the case of General Yar'Adua, this was how it happened. In the wake of the rather turbulent SDP gubernatorial primaries in 1991, fought with much acrimony, rivalry and dichotomy, Kingibe found himself torn between the two powerful streams within SDP. Adamawa State pitched defunct PFN's Atiku Abubakar against defunct PSP's Bala Takaya, while Lagos State threw Femi Agbalajobi of PSP against Dapo Sarumi of PFN.

Kano and other places similarly proved a Herculean nut to crack for the SDP executive. Yar'Adua put in everything to ensure Atiku's victory in Adamawa. But stubborn Bala Takaya would just not budge. Takaya was Kingibe's friend, but Atiku had Yar'Adua as his mentor just like Kingibe. Kingibe thus found himself between the devil and the deep blue sea. We the SDP National Executive (comprising the national officers and the state chairmen) went to hold a meeting in Gateway Hotel, Otta, Ogun State, over the altercations one night. We went there to consider evidence on the gubernatorial primaries' petitions. Suddenly around 2am, an alarm sounded through the hotel and everybody rushed out of their rooms. Someone had made an urgent phone call to the SDP leadership, informing us that our lives were in danger from one of the factions mobilising people to come and kill us in the hotel.

Quickly, we fled from the hotel without leaving a forwarding address. Racing at breakneck speed, our cars formed a long convoy. Nobody told us where we were heading. Finally, we landed at Ikoyi Hotel, about 30 kilometres from Otta.

It was that morning that Yar'Adua sneaked into Ikoyi Hotel to meet Kingibe. During that period Shehu Yar'Adua was a banned politician, courtesy IBB, and could not attend political meetings openly. As the Exco sat holding the meeting, suddenly, Kingibe took my hand and led me outside the hall to a corner. And there was General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua. Outside the hearing of other people, Kingibe introduced us and told the General, "This Frank you see here is only one of the few you can trust in this National Executive Council. He is principled. He is straightforward. He is objective."

I had seen Yar'Adua on previous occasions in crowded and hurried arenas and at clandestine meetings. But we had never really met. We had gone to him on the day his clique included my name on the PFN list as Bendel State's unchallenged candidate for SDP Financial Secretary.

But this time at Ikoyi Hotel, we stood real close, toe-to-toe. Kingibe told him I was neutral and objective. Later, Kingibe left and Yar'Adua spoke to me alone, "You people who are principled, this Adamawa matter, how do you see it? The Administrator that you people sent to the state has reported that Atiku won. The neutral Caretaker Committee Chairman has reported that this same man won. And yet they are saying that this man did not win. What do you people have to say to all these?"

I smiled, determined not to give any straight answer, only assuring him that we would allow truth to prevail. After that encounter, the ice melted between the General and me. One day in Abuja, he called me and asked, "Why do you always use red cap?"

I told him, “In the Labour unions, we like red. It signifies the struggle.”

He let off a rare throaty laugh, “You Labour people. Mr. Red Cap.”

Four

BEGINNING OUR FIGHT FOR JUNE 12

The annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election by Gen. Ibrahim Bababangida, set off a nationwide cacophony of rage. As Vice President-elect, Kingibe was very sad. I was equally sad and enraged. For the millions of Nigerians who hoped that the election would end long years of despotic military rule, the annulment came as a huge shock. Initially, nothing concrete was done to display the collective resentment, just a few wildcat demonstrations here and there by the civil society groups. From all I knew about revolutionary struggles, a strong military dictatorship anywhere in the world would not be shaken by placard-carrying demonstrations. The junta would just laugh such efforts to scorn. Peaceful placard-carrying demonstrators and street protests would only bother civilised democracies like Britain, US and France. However, it could have little impact in South America, where you have such hardened autocrats like Augusto Pinochet in Chile and Fidel Castro in Cuba, nor would it move stone-hearted fiends like Adolf Hitler in Germany or a Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union. As a matter of fact, African dictators generally modeled themselves after these hardened characters.

Looking at the horizon, you could find no immediate response to the military's assault on Nigerians' popular wish, as expressed through the ballot-box on June 12, 1993.

In the words of Bob Marley:

*How long shall they kill our prophets,
While we stand aside and look?*

Taking the task of rallying a formidable opposition to the annulment as a personal challenge, I called my NUPENG 'kitchen cabinet,' made up of my two deputies —Joseph Akinlaja and Elijah Okougbo, and the union's President, Kojo Agamene. I asked them what they felt about the political jam. They expressed their resentment, and I responded that if it was that bad, then we had to do something about it. We all agreed and decided to use our platform as organized Labour union to protest against the annulment.

That took us to Nigeria Labour Congress, NLC. We presented our resolutions to them and seek for their support. After several meetings held together, many communiques were issued, condemning the annulment and asking for a disannulment.

After passing a resolution that Abiola's mandate remained sacrosanct and that the Babangida government should restore it by disannulling the election, the NLC had mandated me, being Labour's highest political office holder, and knowing my connection with the SDP national executive and the state governors, to go to Abuja and present Labour's position. At the SDP Secretariat in Abuja, I was told the SDP Chairman, Chief Tony Anenih, had retired to his hotel room. The Secretary, Sule Lamido, had traveled out of Abuja and, only the Treasurer, Okechukwu Odunze, could be found around. I thereafter went to greet him in his office.

Odunze looked at me suspiciously and finally said, "Frank, you are here, welcome. But don't think your name is in MKO's list! We have the list of his cabinet members and your name is not there. You are just wasting your time with all this running around. MKO's brother, Oladipo Diya, is the Minister of Defence."

Odunze reeled out some other names and their supposedly allotted positions.

I quickly cut him short. “Look, Odunze, you have started again. Did I tell you it is my hunger for a ministerial appointment that is fueling my struggle? If I wanted to be a minister, the military regime would have made me one long ago. So why are you telling me about this! “Take your resolution. This is the resolution NLC sent to all of you. Where can I find Chief Anenih?”

“The Chairman is in his hotel room. You will find him there,” he said, snatching the paper from me. “I am going to my hotel now.”

“Well, before you go to your hotel, I am taking your car. You know I did not come with a car and the taxi that brought me from the airport has left.”

“Okay, but the driver has to drop me in my hotel first. Then you can take the car anywhere you like, he concluded.”

The car dropped Odunze off at his Sheraton Hotel lodging and thereafter took me to NICON-NOGA Hotel to meet Chief Anenih. When I got there, I phoned him at the reception and he immediately told me to come up to his room. Getting there, I gave him the resolution. To my surprise however, he read it disinterestedly.

Chief Anenih finally looked up and said: “Frank, you know I am even tired of all these things. Do you know that even MKO’s kinsmen are already lobbying for his position?”

The government had by then, told NEC to organise fresh polls for February. In fact, that had been the mandate of the Interim National Government, ING, instituted by General Babangida. That was why it wore the appellation ‘interim’ government.

He continued, “In fact, the posters of one of them are already pasted all over the streets here in Abuja. As for me, the way politics is going in this country, I will just return to Uromi, my home town, and go into farming. I am just tired of all this mess,” he said, dejectedly.

For over 90 minutes, I was trying to convince one of my earliest political mentors and Chairman of the party, whose victory was being so contemptuously traduced, to keep up the battle. But it was clear that Chief Tony Anenih was already discouraged. However, unlike Odunze who appeared to have made up his mind that June 12 was a dead horse not worth flogging, Anenih behaved maturely, like the father of a terminally ill patient, who must still hold on to hope, although his shrewd judgement made it clear that chances of survival were 50-50. I could see, even as far back as then, that Anenih no longer believed in June 12. What may have killed his interest at this stage still left me guessing. In the process of our interaction, he had mentioned that certain kinsmen of MKO were already warming up for the fresh election already announced by the military junta. In that direction, he had mentioned Olu Falae among others. And that Falae's campaign posters were all over the place was very difficult to believe? Olu Falae, to me, is a known distinguished Nigerian elder statesman, and one of the first pro-June 12 party leaders. I however kept this to myself. I was therefore taken aback at the Abuja airport when I ran into Olu Falae, accompanied by Comrade Ekpo Bassey, one-time Mayor of Calabar municipality. Even though we greeted warmly but I was a bit suspicious of their mission to Abuja at that period in time. I bade them goodbye and left to catch my flight to Lagos. If he did, as the Chairman of the victorious party, Anenih would have mobilised against the annulment. He failed to. But his vast political experience dictated he could not be openly anti-June 12. What may have killed his interest was the unprincipled opportunism displayed by MKO's kinsmen, who appeared eager to bury the mandate. Perhaps Anenih also felt alienated by the way MKO kept him in the dark about strategies for reviving the mandate.

I left the SDP Chairman's place for the governors' meeting. By the time I arrived there, the meeting had ended and they had all dispersed. Only Governor Felix Ibru was around and he was just about leaving in his car.

“Frank, take it easy o,” Ibru said after reading the NLC resolution. “I know, the way you carry things to the extreme.” Since the other governors had departed, I returned to the airport and flew back to Lagos immediately.

However, it soon became clear to me that Paschal and a lot of people in the Labour movement were insincere in their fight for June 12. Paschal dragged his feet on real action. At meetings, I would speak tough, trying to convince the people on the need for aggressive action. I managed to win some of us to my side. But after sometime, the whole enthusiasm simply petered down and fizzled out. But why did Paschal show so much apathy to the struggle for June 12?

They say only a thin line separates love from hate. Paschal had hotly courted Abiola while hoping to be his running mate, but having lost the fight, Paschal quickly turned against Abiola. This grudge Paschal used against everybody in the country, including me. He took the bitterness too far.

Frustrated at the NLC level, NUPENG decided to mobilise on its own. The union gave me leave to tour the four zones of NUPENG. We began to hold meetings with the zonal councils, which were the crucial organs of the union. The Warri Zone had the old Mid-West or Bendel, comprising all the oil workers’ units and chapters in the riverine areas from Benin, to Escravos, to Forcados and to Ughelli. They all came to Warri. The Port Harcourt Zone had the old Eastern Region of Nigeria – Eket, Brass, Owerri and Enugu: and they all heeded our summons and converged at Port Harcourt. With depot units coming from as far as Maiduguri, the Northern Zone met with us in Kaduna. Lagos Zone contains the old Western Region, having units and chapters from towns like Ibadan, Ondo, Ore and Sagamu, and we spoke with all of them in Lagos.

To some places, I went alone, other places I went with one or both of my deputies where we all addressed the members. In a

nutshell, we sold the idea that: “This struggle for June 12 is not an economic struggle, and not for monetary gains. You are not going to claim allowances. You are not going to claim arrears. You will not have salary increases. You are only going to fight a political fight - a fight that will liberate your children and your children’s children. You are not going to gain anything monetary. In fact, you will make sacrifices.”

All we said must have sounded like strange gospel to NUPENG members previously used to aluta for personal and immediate gains. Our mobilisation was the first in the history of trade union struggles in the country. Every other struggles - by Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT), ASUU, civil service, organised private sector, etc., aimed at securing immediate economic gains for the welfare of the agitating workers, but not this one. This was a clear-cut political struggle. And our maxim became ‘Gain first political freedom, and every other thing will follow.’

Much depended on the outcome of our tour of the zonal councils. If the zones indicated they would not support the cause, it would puncture whatever dreams we had that NUPENG would launch the struggle for June 12, end-of-story. But it turned out that workers themselves nursed a grudge against the military’s action. They only needed an articulate leadership to forge them into a potent fighting force. We provided that leadership. Thus, we easily won the support of the zones. With the zones passing the resolution to support this struggle, we secured the needed mandate to launch a struggle against the annulment.

However, there remained one more battle to win before we could proceed. Although the zonal councils had given their support, we still needed to make it a joint decision of the National Executive Council. Should the NEC say no, that would have automatically aborted the plan. No bird flies with one wing, especially when the organisation’s constitution had strictly forbidden such. Having

heard from the zonal councils, we summoned a NUPENG NEC meeting for Petroleum Training Institute, Warri.

Based on the zones' endorsement of the struggle, we developed an 11- point demand to be presented to government. This we took to the National Executive meeting of the union at the Petroleum Training Institute (PTI), Warri, which gave full support to go ahead with the action. So, no way could anyone condemn NUPENG's subsequent action as a one-man show. It helped later on. Throughout my incarceration, the government could not prosecute nor bring charges against me in court, for I was merely executing the mandate of the National Executive and other organs of my union.

Thereafter, we returned to Lagos. I called on my friend who was Vice President-elect, Ambassador Kingibe, to tell him what NUPENG had decided to do. I told him "I am tired of all this talking and talking. I am not seeing anything happening. Babangida and his boys have taken this mandate from us. The civil society, the Press and the public are all doing their best, but the military government will not budge."

"Beautiful. It is a good idea. You mean your union is behind this?" he told me.

I replied: "Within the NLC, we tried to do our best, but the NLC will not..."

"Forget the NLC," Kingibe interrupted. His response clearly showed he was abreast of happenings in the NLC. I had always admired his Intelligence network that appeared to feed him with important information in the country. In our days as SDP executives, Kingibe used to tell me the specific time, place and room number of the hotel that some power brokers were having secret meetings. I guess he usually got such information from his former colleagues in the intelligence services. Now he told me: "I know your NLC, you can't get anything from them. Forget it. Your people have sold out

to government. But Frank, please, there is one thing. I know you are a tough person and you didn't need anybody, but let us go and see MKO. At least, let him know about your plan. Because I know you, you will just go solo. You won't tell any person. I know the reason you reveal this plan to me is because I am your friend. If not, you will just go on your own and carry out this action. But this man is the President-elect, let us go and meet him and tell him, he suggested."

Based on his suggestion, I met Kingibe at home. Then, we both drove from his Victoria Island residence to Abiola's palatial abode at Ikeja. Abiola's place looked like a Mecca, with huge presence of top politicians. Hordes of supporters camped outside the gates on the street. Members of the local and international press also formed part of the vast crowd. I saw foreign correspondents with recorders and still cameras. The CNN crew stood out with camera and satellite gear. Despite them all, we had immediate access. Abiola dispersed everyone with him and immediately met Kingibe and I.

Kingibe introduced me. "Do you know this man? He is the General Secretary of the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers, NUPENG, and he was the national financial secretary during my regime in SDP."

Abiola nodded. I could see respect spring into his eyes.

"This man you see here is a man you must trust," Kingibe continued. "He has some plans. We must trust and cooperate with him."

Abiola said, "There are some other people too, some members of Road Transport something-something, who have also come to meet me that they have some plans too."

"Forget those people." I interjected. "You don't know anything about unions and you are talking about Lagos road transport people. Those people cannot do anything. Are they not the same people that have different factions and once the police threaten them they

fold up? I am talking of a long struggle. Not two days of causing problems in Ojota Garage and Ojuelegba. Those people are not us. If those people support you, it is okay. What I am talking about is a struggle; real political struggle. They have annulled your election and we need to fight a real battle to regain it. The real support is going to come from the labour movement, which is the NLC itself. But the NLC is not playing ball. Fortunately, NUPENG is virtually the NLC. We hold the country by the jugular. Anytime NLC goes on strike, it is NUPENG that makes the NLC strike tick. And we in NUPENG have taken a decision to fight for the restoration of your mandate,” I said, emphatically.

“I know NLC is still angry over the Paschal business. Well, well...” Abiola muttered. He asked us to come again the next day. When I went to pick Kingibe for the appointment, he was busy with some other pressing business, so he encouraged me to go alone.

MKO received me well. This time, we spoke even more deeply.

“You rich people always have people cringing before you, and so people sit down for hours before seeing you. I do not have that kind of time. I am a union man all my life. If I want to see the MD of Mobil, Shell or NNPC, I get to his office and I see him within two minutes. If we must work together, you must be able to give me quick attention,” I told him frankly.

Immediately, Abiola called two of his security details. He informed me that one of them was in charge of his external security. The other group of security men catered for his internal security. Sometimes, members of the two arms did not know each other. One name that stuck was ‘Ghadaffi’ (now the ace toilet businessman, Otunba Durojaiye Isaac). MKO introduced me to the leaders of the two teams and told them, “Anytime this man comes here, he must have free access. You people must not give him stress at all.”

Then he summoned his wife, Kudirat, “This is Frank Kokori. He is our trusted friend, anytime he comes around in my absence, you must attend to him.”

“Yes, Daddy,” she replied, curtsied before us and left.

As she walked away, MKO said, “Ah, Frank look at that woman, is she not beautiful? After given birth to seven children, she still maintains such a smashing figure,” then, he laughed heartily. Not knowing how to react to such an unexpected diversion, I could only manage a smile at MKO’s yarn. I did not know him much. He wasn’t my friend, but he was already behaving like we were long time beer pub buddies. That day, he told me, “This is the only woman you are to deal with here. Don’t deal with any other person.” Hearing this instruction from a man with a legendary harem of innumerable wives, showed that Abiola ran his household well. Local media once claimed that Abiola had 25 wives and 100 children, scattered across the world. Now I could see first-hand that, on the home front, he maintained a staff-and-line arrangement, with a strict respect for decorum, discipline and seniority.

It was unknown to me that, that night of August 2, Abiola would leave for his controversial trip abroad. Throughout my visit, he gave no such hint. He reportedly got a report shortly afterwards that he would be assassinated, and then escaped abroad in his private plane. People thought it an act of cowardice. A lot of people claimed that MKO lost an ample opportunity to claim his mandate through that his flight abroad. Even a section of the press took him to the cleaners for that escapade.

But I never joined such critics. As far as I was concerned, he had gone abroad for the useful purpose of talking to important international figures in the world and garnering international support for his mandate. However, Abiola kept phoning me. I would always update him on the raging struggle and he expressed deep appreciation for our efforts. At a stage, he revealed to me that General Sani Abacha is our man.

While Abiola stayed put abroad, two significant events happened in quick succession. General Babangida ‘stepped aside’ on 26th

August and unfortunately relinquished power to the Shonekan-led Interim National Government (ING). Then, NLC, purely on NUPENG's instigation, called a strike on 28th August, 1993. NLC had not even mobilised for the strike, for NLC never really called a strike. It was NUPENG that actually mobilised oil workers to go on strike. This led to scarcity of fuel which eventually made workers to sit at home. However, civil servants at the Federal Secretariat at Abuja and other essential service providers went to their offices. The federal government quickly called the NLC leaders to Abuja for a meeting which I refused to attend. After much bashing from the civil society and the press, NLC reluctantly went on strike on 28 August, 1993. As expected, only NUPENG eventually mobilized and executed the strike. Then the strike became effective so far as transportation and movement was concerned. Immediately NLC returned from Abuja, I found myself alone. NLC called a National Executive Council meeting to call off the strike. It quickly became clear to everybody that NLC was not serious, for none of the conditions for calling the strike had been met by government. We had asked for the disannulment of the election which was not granted by the government.

After the Abuja meeting with the government, Labour leaders that had previously supported NUPENG suddenly abandoned me and the position I espoused. They backed Paschal. I spoke and spoke and yet, they would not listen to me. That was the day I shed tears. What was happening? NLC chiefs had ditched our joint decision just like that. They wanted us to return to work without achieving anything. The situation was pathetic. Fortunately, the world press was waiting in Michael Imoudu Hall at the NLC Secretariat, and I addressed them, flanked by my NUPENG colleagues. I said emphatically that NLC could not call off a strike they did not call in the first instance; and that only NUPENG Executive could do, because they actually mobilized and call for the strike. That was the

beginning of our disagreement with NLC. Since we had the backing of all the organs of the union, the President and I were talking authoritatively. So we left the NLC secretariat without shifting grounds.

Let me establish here that the activities of NUPENG at that time was not funded by Abiola as some believed. He was abroad. NUPENG, as a well-organised Labour Union, had its own funds. What we put into that struggle financially, and other sacrifices made, will remain unquantifiable. For example, the oil companies had the best communication system in the country, and this was at my disposal because my members were manning the system. We used this for our mobilisation. The oil companies had the best fleet of aircrafts, at least, to the oil rich Niger-Delta. They usually moved from offshore to places beyond Escravos and Eket. Our members would usually put me on the manifest without even clearing with their management. Such were the facilities that we enjoyed. NUPENG had its own funds which we decentralised with the premonition that the military could have our accounts frozen in the heat of the struggle.

One day, in the course of all this, I got a call from Chief Dele Ige, younger brother to Chief Bola Ige, former Governor of Oyo State, and a devoted disciple of Chief Obafemi Awolowo in the First and Second Republics. Dele Ige had later settled into a life of big business. He was the owner of Ibadan-based Transnab, a giant haulage company, whose staffers were members of NUPENG. So, he was a man I knew very well. On this day, Dele Ige said MKO had sent to me a message from abroad, through one of his wives who was the National Concord's Managing Director, Dr. (Mrs.) Doyin Abiola. I was perturbed by this information. Clearly, it contradicted MKO's clear instruction that I should deal with only Kudirat, of all his wives. I did not want any woman palaver. I would not go

and mess up myself in Abiola's domestic matters. Kingibe was running the local fort for Abiola at this time and we were always having contacts. Being more familiar with the Abiola clan than myself, I went to tell him what Dele Ige communicated to me. To my great relief, Kingibe said he would handle the matter himself. Afterwards, I contacted him and he told me to forget it, there had been a communication mix-up.

All this while, Kingibe and I kept exchanging notes. He was steadfast and went all out to encourage me. A few other Nigerians too gave us robust backing.

Chief Shonekan too made some moves to meet me personally. His men, Prince Afonja, then the Secretary of Labour, and Chief Don Etiebet, Secretary for Petroleum Resources, made efforts to reach me on phone. Both men manned my two traditional constituencies. After series of efforts, Etiebet, with Mr. Chamberlain Oyibo, the Managing Director of NNPC, eventually came to my house. Chamberlain Oyibo became Group MD of NNPC after the ING's suspension of his predecessors, Dr. Edmond Daukoru, and the Group Executive Director-Finance and Account, Chief Okey Okwara. Etiebet had come to plead that we call off the strike. But in his usually brash way, Etiebet started behaving as if he owned me and my house.

"Frank, enough is enough. You should tell your boys to call off this action," he demanded.

"No, no. It is not as easy as that, Don Etiebet," to call it off, I have to call a meeting of my National Executive Council," I replied him frankly.

"No, you can do it as the general secretary," he said and followed it up with a subtle threat, "You know what the government can do."

At that stage, I blew up and shouted at him, "Walk out of this place! Get out of my house!"

Clearly startled by my reaction, Etiebet piped down and began to pacify me. We reconciled immediately and began to make sense again. I told him that we would do something but that it would be a joint decision of NUPENG's Executive Council.

To check the power of NUPENG, the government, during Etiebet's tenure, tried to break the 'monopoly' of tanker drivers by buying hundreds of tanker trucks for NNPC. But then, who would drive the trucks? Of course, only members of the Petroleum Tanker Drivers (PTD), which was a branch of NUPENG. That apart, how many tankers could serve the country's population of 120 million at that time? Indeed, the government embarked on this folly. But this idea was later dropped.

In that atmosphere, Kingibe and I met General Sani Abacha, then serving as the Secretary of Defence, the substantive Number Two man to ING Head of State, Chief Shonekan. Kingibe invited me along to see Abacha in the General's official residence, the Flagstaff House at Ikoyi. I could only guess that the General told him to bring me. We took off from Kingibe's house in a car brought by one of Abacha's sons, Mohammed or Ibrahim (I am not sure which of them now). One of my sons, Franco, drove my car behind the Abacha car that took us. I had two drivers those days, but I preferred my sons to chauffeur me around for security reasons. I did not want anyone to know my tracks. In the heat of the struggle, I could only trust my children because paid drivers could sell out. With as little as ₦5,000, drivers had been known to sell details of their bosses' movements to assassins. This I learnt from reading about the operations of the CIA, Mozard, KGB, Gestapo, M15, M16 and other intelligence groups. When we got to the Flagstaff House gate, I saw the wisdom in riding to the rendezvous in Abacha's own vehicle. The security details immediately opened the gates without a peep into the car, the sight of the Abacha boy was enough.

I found General Abacha very cordial; almost patronising. You would think he could not hurt a fly. Nothing revealed that, underneath such a gentlemanly façade, hid a deadly ambition that would later mow down countless politicians and citizens. The oil workers strike was still raging and biting, and Abacha wanted NUPENG's support. He requested that we should call off the strike and we should not make trouble. I told him we did not want trouble too, but a revalidation of Abiola's mandate. When we finished talking with him, Abacha, walking barefoot in long kaftan, accompanied us to our own car and asked me to see him in his office the following day. Nice man, I thought.

Shortly after Kingibe and I drove out of Flagstaff House, something curious happened. As if he had been watching us from a hidden monitor, MKO immediately phoned my mobile line. He told me that I should cooperate with General Abacha. All these baffled me, especially the visit and the timing of Abiola's phone call at the end of the visit. I did not understand this coincidence.

The following day September 7, as Abacha requested, I went to his office at Race Course, Lagos, the Late Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa's old office. This same office Abacha inherited as Chief of Army Staff, but he had continued to maintain it as Defence Secretary, just as he had refused to vacate the Flagstaff House as his official residence. He appeared to love those two buildings. The appointment was for 10am. But I learnt the General had not shown up that day, having made a trip to Abuja the previous day. One of the soldiers told me they were expecting him. As I waited patiently expecting him, barely 15 minutes later, a blaze of siren and outriders heralded his arrival.

It still baffles me till today the way General Abacha subsequently grossly maltreated me. Maybe, my refusal to join his government made him really mad at me. But on that day, he showed much of decorum and courtesy. With all the power and protocol typified by all this entourage of military brass hats hanging around him,

he broke away as soon as he saw me in the complex and shouted: “Ah, Frank, come.. come.” Laying a thick hand on my shoulder, he marched me up to his office. General Ibrahim Gumel (later Defence and Security Adviser) and Brigadier General Aboki Abdullahi (Director of Military Intelligence) followed us closely behind.

After we settled down in his office, Abacha again requested that NUPENG should call off the action. He gave assurances that most of our demands would be met and there was no cause for alarm. Against the backdrop of MKO’s phone call the previous day, Abacha’s entreaties sign-posted for me that the NUPENG struggle had yielded a decisive fruit. I returned to the Secretariat, called my ‘kitchen cabinet’ and informed them about my meeting with Abacha. Thereafter we summoned a meeting of members of the National Executive within reach. Having secured enough members to form the necessary quorum, we called off the action that same day. Abacha was very happy, especially as our communique stated categorically that we had decided to call off the action due to his intervention, and that of other well-meaning Nigerians. He appreciated the way we acknowledge his intervention that led to the termination of the strike. Unknown to me, he was manipulating us too. The strike had lasted from August 28, 1993 to September 7, 1993.

After we called off the strike, NUPENG, through subsequent press statements, maintained that its members nationwide remained on the red alert, and could resume the action at any moment. The ING was uncomfortable with this our position. Labour Secretary, Prince Afonja, immediately came to my house and convinced me to go and see the ING Head of State at the State House, Marina, Lagos. As usual, one of my sons drove me down for the meeting. I dined with Shonekan, alone. I simply told him, “Sir, I have nothing against you. What we have in place now as a government is best called usurpation of someone else’s position. You did not contest any election. The man who won the election is there, and he has not

been given his mandate. You have taken over, it is not fair.”

Apparently enamoured with the allure of fleeting power, Shonekan appeared unwilling to buy the idea I espoused, but I knew that Abacha was the one pulling the strings. Even then, at this time, I could not do much myself because the main protagonist himself, Chief Abiola, made me to believe that Abacha was working for the June 12 mandate.

However, I think I would have liked the personality of Shonekan in less combative circumstances. I could see he was not a brash or forceful character. A soft-spoken gentleman of ideas, he believed in the power of verbal persuasion. His parting shot to me was, “Mr. Kokori, if you are not going to support me, please, don’t fight me, so I can carry out my economic policies.”

I did not know how that would be possible in the controversial circumstances in which Shonekan had acquired power and in the light of Nigerians’ quest for justice. But I assured him that oil workers’ stance would depend on prevailing circumstances.

“NUPENG is not fighting you, Sir. You can see we have not issued any new ultimatum for now. We are presently on recess. But when there is occasion for it, NUPENG will fight on the side of the people.”

Poor Shonekan, he learnt too late that his strongest link was his weakest; his most powerful and most trusted ally would be his ultimate nemesis and betrayer.

Five

BATTLING ABACHA

On November 17, 1993, General Sani Abacha overthrew the Shonekan-led ING. This facilitated Abiola's return from abroad and he came home to a heroic welcome. A fantastic crowd welcomed him back to Nigeria. We all waited for him at the Presidential Wing of the International Airport. The usually 15-minute trip from the airport to his residence took four hours. It was clearly a hero's welcome. In a way, Abacha smoothened MKO's return path. The security agencies cooperated warmly. That day, Abiola and I met briefly. The next day, I saw Abiola again and he expressed much appreciation for NUPENG's efforts.

He called my son, Franco, who had chauffeured me to the place, telling him, "I will give you a wristwatch." But the President-elect soon changed his mind, "Ah, you are already wearing a very good watch. So I will not give you a wristwatch. Because you are a student, I will give you a pen." And Franco got a good pen. Kudirat also recommended my sons highly, openly commending their driving skills to her husband. Kudirat and I had traveled together around town throughout MKO's foreign trip, holding meetings and executing covert operations. She would leave her choice cars and ride in my Peugeot. My two children would be in the front seat, with me and Mrs. Abiola at the back.

One may wonder why I chose to see Abiola, and other key elements in the unfolding drama, without the company of my NUPENG compatriots. It was strategic. Even in the Bible, Moses never planned the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt with a big committee. Had he chosen that method, the Jews might have remained in Egypt up till today. But anything I did with the powers-that-be, I called my two lieutenants (and my President, whenever he was available) in the morning to brief them. Also, with time, especially when I went underground, I had my President with me and he went to places and effectively represented us at meetings. It was safe for him. People did not know him well, but they knew me. So it was easier for him to move around. I operated underground.

On such occasions, the NUPENG President would go out and later bring me reports, as we usually stayed in the same hotels and guest houses.

In all this, I appeared to be a key focus. Yes, and for two reasons. For one, my tripartite political forays had bestowed on me considerable political clout above all my comrades at NUPENG. But more importantly, like other union GS, I held a post that cast me as the organisation's chief operating officer. At that time, the way NUPENG was structured, the secretariat served as the engine room of the union. NUPENG's secretariat operated like the bureaucracy in a well-run democracy, and we the full-time officials in the union ensured and guaranteed continuity. We maintained tradition and structure. As for the elected officers, they were here today and gone tomorrow. The turnover of elected officers in the union was too high to allow this category of union leadership to make sustainable impact. At best, elected officers passed as honorary members. Unionism for them was incidental. They had as primary assignment their positions on oil rigs, in the offices or in the refineries.

Let me highlight something about full-time/career unionists and honorary unionists. There is this cat-and-mouse relationship

between them, the sort that also exists in the boardroom of government parastatals, where many board chairmen like to run their respective organisations like a full-time employment, which is wrong. Industrial unions have executive councils that are supposed to serve part-time, but they always want to work full-time. So they leave their work place and come to the secretariat to work full-time. This always creates conflict between the career unionists and the part-time executives. Unfortunately too for the full-time career unionists, the part-timers control the purse, and as they say, whoever pays the piper dictates the tune. They are in the majority and they have voting rights as the executives. The General Secretarys the Deputy General Secretary and Assistant General Secretary have no voting rights.

However, those elected today can be voted out at the next election or lose their junior staff positions as soon as they get promoted to senior staff positions, and for this particular reason, some do not even live out their tenure. For managements are so fearful of NUPENG's militancy that they sometimes tie up elected officers with official positions they term extensions of management, and which automatically disqualifies these employees from being part of the union.

But the secretariat possesses a stable, impervious and untouchable character. To managements, secretariat operatives are untouchables. And the General Secretary hold fort as the chief executive officer, the Managing Director or the General Manager. He and his subordinates from the secretariat are accorded that respect. NUPENG's GS is like the General Secretary of the United Nations or the Commonwealth. Presidents come and go, but the Secretary remains. And in the June 12 struggle, I did all I did as General Secretary, CEO, of NUPENG.

That was why some people would say that I personalised the struggle. It was not my fault. That is the way the Constitution

structured the union. Moreover, I served with unquantifiable dedication: I served with all my life. My entire youth went into service to NUPENG, Can you imagine that of the 22 years that I served with NUPENG, I spent four straight years in detention? That is not counting the other short-term detentions I spent in the course of unionism. No NUPENG President ever spent that length of time in incarceration. Of all those who ever mounted the post of NUPENG President, only Comrade Kojo Agamene ever went on detention. Without meaning to diminish his invaluable contributions to the struggle, I must here point out that, compared to my long time in the gulag, Agamene spent only 16 months or so. So, you see that the authorities themselves had focus. They realised that the General Secretary was the moving spirit of the oil workers' struggle, Get Kokori and that is the end of the struggle. My members too recognised that once you got their leader, the General Secretary, you would take the steam out of the struggle. And everyone will recall that as soon as the government arrested me, the strike fizzled out. So when I lay claim to being the moving spirit of NUPENG's June 12 struggle, I was not being immodest.

If with the qualifications with which I joined the union in 1977, I had joined the oil industry instead, I would have been among the top four executives in any of the multinationals by 1993. If by the 1970s I had joined any oil company as an Industrial Relations Officer, by the June 12 episode, I would have been General Manager - Human Resources, which was what my mates were at that time. So my status was high. I was a leader.

However, I was happy that my followers, no matter anyone else's insinuations, credit me with running an open union. I do not just mean that figuratively. All the time I occupied the office of GS, the door to my office, my cabinet and my drawers, always remained open. They carried no locks. In fact, I instructed my deputies that

if they must lock their offices, they should hand over the keys to the security men or the receptionists. But you would never find the General Secretary's office locked. I was that open. And twice a day, I would hold my inner caucus meeting. The first one brought me together with my two deputies. Thereafter, I held a larger meeting with my two deputies, my assistant general secretaries and the head of the finance department. We did this every morning. And at the forum, anybody could ask as many questions as possible. After this, I held the staff meeting, comprising everybody in the secretariat, during which even the most junior cleaner could raise an issue. All the staff knew that I operated NUPENG transparently. Little wonder that they maintained absolute loyalty and faith in me throughout that struggle.

Abiola returned from his foreign trip and to all and sundry, he appeared passive about reclaiming his mandate. Anytime he appeared in public, he took refuge in idioms (parables). One of his most quoted related to the futility of a sane person trying to halt a moving train. What he did not tell the world, as I learnt, was that he had indeed been assured that Abacha would shove out Shonekan and hand over power to him. With Shonekan off the scene, Abiola waited for the General to fulfill the last leg of the bargain, and Abiola waited with unalloyed hope.

This informed why Abiola, unwary that his uniformed 'ally' had long derailed from the June 12 agenda, paid General Abacha that well-publicised courtesy visit a few days after the dictator came into power. The new regime made colossal media hype of that visit. The result was that the pro-democracy agitators, civil movements and the international community sheathed their sword in anticipation that Abacha would sooner than later, invite Abiola to come and execute his mandate. In that post-crisis calm when Abacha's evil intentions remained unknown to Abiola and his allies, Abacha took time to consolidate his hold on power.

Meanwhile, NUPENG returned to its normal business, indifferent because the man who wore the shoe maintained silence. My discussions with Abiola were few at this point in time, mostly through casual phone calls. I rarely visited him. So I had time for other things. I belonged to some committees of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Geneva. (The ILO had been established in 1919 under the Treaty of Versailles in the belief “that universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based on social justice”.) Around this time, ILO’s Petroleum and Private Sector Committee to which I belonged, called a meeting of members and I left Nigeria to attend that committee meeting in Geneva.

Around that same period, Dr. Nelson Mandela was being sworn in as the first black President of South Africa. He has emerged from a clean, clear, and rancor-free presidential election. Abiola was personally invited by the Madiba himself to attend this historic inauguration. Bashurun M.K.O. Abiola arrived Pretoria and received the treatment due to Nigeria’s President-elect. Added to the various criticisms that trailed his sudden flight abroad in 1993, the grandeur of Mandela’s inauguration, provided a new tonic for the millionaire’s ambition.

From South Africa, MKO frantically tried to get in touch with me in Geneva but he failed. When I came back, Kudirat phoned me immediately, “MKO has been looking for you since, please try and reach him.” Since MKO introduced Kudirat to me, I had been more in touch with her than with MKO. MKO had several telephone sets and he engaged in almost unbroken conversation with callers from all over the world. So what I usually did was call Kudirat’s phone line and ask her to give the phone to her husband. She would immediately rush over to him and announce, “Daddy, Kokori wants to talk with you.” That way I received the millionaire’s instant attention.

That was exactly what I did on the day Kudirat gave me Bashorun's message. He instantly came on the line, "Yes, yes, where have you been? Come over immediately."

On my arrival at his place, the millionaire said, "I am going to claim my mandate." I maintained a staid, unimpressed look. So you now want to claim your mandate? I thought to myself, very much aware of the irony of the situation. It looked like shutting the cage's door after the bird had flown.

I told MKO, "At the time the people told you to claim your mandate, you did not, now you want to claim your mandate when everybody's interest has fizzled out. How do we do it?"

He sounded most determined, saying "No, no, no. I must claim my mandate this time; I must claim it."

I could read strong determination in his attitude. I said everything to discourage him, but Abiola refused. He sounded and looked very determined. He told me he needed the support of the civil society, Labour and all pro-democracy groups. I knew very well that without the support of these groups, there was no other way to launch a successful agitation. My concern revolved on how to build up momentum again. It would be a herculean task. The momentum with which we launched the struggle in 1993 had since flagged and died.

Why this sudden rejuvenation of Chief Abiola's interest? Only God can tell exactly why. But I guess it had to do with Mandela. MKO had gone to South Africa and the razzmatazz of Mandela's inauguration no doubt, dazzled this world-acclaimed businessman. For the first time in his life, he woke up to a startling reality. Money was not everything. Power was something you can't quantify in terms of money. Even though he could be counted amongst the 10 richest men in the world, MKO found he had no real power. Power is the most exciting thing in the world. I love power myself, I think power is more interesting than wealth. If you use power properly you will

change the life of people around you and the larger society. You have wealth for personal use, and even with wealth you can still remain isolated. But you use power for change. Abiola too must have woken up to this realisation. Here was someone who financed the Black Caucus in the US Congress, yet a relatively penniless Mandela had magnetised much more worldwide respect, attention and acclaim due to power. And MKO realised he stood a chance of gaining power in Nigeria – if he would fight for it.

Maybe too, he had received a psychological push from the newly-formed National Democratic Coalition, NADECO. Early May 1994, some eminent Nigerian individuals and pro-democracy groups had rallied together to found NADECO. The organisation had an impressive assemblage, including Chief Michael Adegunle Ajasin, Chief Anthony Enahoro, Air Vice Marshal Dan Suleiman, Chief Alfred Rewane, Chief Olu Falae, Mr. Ayo Opatokun, Ndubisi Kanu, Pa Adesanya, etc. It had as its *raison d'être* the restoration of Moshood Abiola's June 12 mandate. NADECO gave Abacha till the end of 31st May, 1994 to quit power. That was the scenario when Abiola spoke to me upon my return from Geneva.

“Well, Chief, if you are serious and won't capitulate, we shall see what we can do. “He retorted,” Me? This time you will see I am damn serious; really serious.”

I then summoned my Kitchen Cabinet in the union and asked them, “These NADECO people, have they approached you because I read in the papers that they said Abacha must leave by the end of May?”

My lieutenants reported that no NADECO representative had either approached NUPENG or called any meeting whatsoever with NUPENG on their crusade.

“You mean it?” I screamed. “And they are issuing an ultimatum? Ah, maybe they have some powers they will use to ground the government. Okay, let us watch and see what they will do.”

Thenceforth, I began to avoid MKO. Finally, May ending came and NADECO's ultimatum ended with not even a demonstration anywhere in the country. Not even in Lagos, where the civil society could effortlessly organise a public match simply by whistling. In other words, the new organisation had not even had the decency and sense to mobilise civil society groups and Labour, even when everyone knew the role they played in 1993. Thus, NADECO's first outing failed woefully. As I said earlier however, it is not really clear how NADECO impacted on MKO.

But in June, I began to talk with MKO again. And on June 11, 1994, Bashorun M.K.O. declared himself President at Epetedo, Lagos, and immediately disappeared underground. With the security agencies frantically hunting for him, Abiola was nowhere to be found. Then on 23rd June, he resurfaced again to a tumultuous reception in Lagos. After the mass rally and jubilation in Lagos, he returned home with an impressively gargantuan crowd.

That day, it dawned on me that MKO was a businessman, pure and simply, not a revolutionary, for he had failed to plan for any eventuality. He never planned anything revolutionary to take care of the other aspect of the struggle. How do you declare yourself President in the face of a sitting military junta and expect to be treated with kid gloves? MKO had clearly underestimated General Abacha. Abacha was a ruthless, one-track monster. Abacha's predecessor, Babangida, would never have attempted half the ruthless things that Abacha unleashed on the opposition. Babangida was Machiavellian, but he was somebody who still wanted the public to love him; he always set his eyes on getting a good public image in any of his actions. In power, Babangida balanced his action and not once did he ever adorn the attitude of let the whole country hate me, I don't care. Abacha is different. He wrapped himself in a defiant attitude that said 'To hell with the whole country. Hate me. If you hate me it means nothing to me'.

Yet, Abiola with his Epetedo Declaration had dared defy Abacha's rule without making plans for contingencies or security. Not even to provide for an alternative lodging for that crucial night. He slept in his house. What a mistake! After giving him that day's big welcome bash, everybody departed, leaving the President-elect alone with his family and the small retinue of security guards that he usually maintained. And the predictable happened. Around 1am, June 24, 1994, my phone rang and there came the piercing, weeping voice of Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, "Chief Kokori! Chief Kokori! My husband has been arrested. He has been arrested by about 500 policemen. They came in and took my husband away. I struggled with them. I followed them to the airport and I held on to him. They kicked and pushed me aside and took him away on a flight."

All I could do was offer Kudirat consolations over the phone. "Madam, take it easy. Your husband is a hero. You know even Mandela was taken away for several years and now he is enthroned."

Maybe it was the wrong thing to say just then. For no loving wife would like to hear that she would be parted from her husband for a fraction of the 27 years that Mandela spent at Robben Island Prison and other detention centres. But I knew no other thing to say just then. I was both angry and confused.

"It is only you people we can rely on now. Chief Kokori, please, it is only you people we can rely on now," she pleaded.

The woman had so much respect for what NUPENG did in 1993.

"Don't worry Madam. Don't worry. We will do our best. He will come out."

The next morning, I held a meeting with my kitchen cabinet. I laid the whole matter bare before them. The midnight call, Abiola's predicament, among others. Of course they had gleaned some of this from the morning papers, already agog with details of the arrest. Now what do we do?.

It was then I realised the amount of trust and confidence the union reposed in me and their commitment to June 12. After the 1993 exercise, they had received no visible show of appreciation from the Abiola camp, yet my fellow union chiefs now said, “No, we will not accept this.”

We thus began to examine the available scenarios. NLC had failed colossally in 1993, would it make sense for NUPENG to return to NLC again for a joint effort to save Abiola? However, we realised we had no choice than to approach NLC again with this new proposal, for in any democratic struggle, the more the participants the merrier. And so, to NLC we went.

However, we found Paschal still completely consumed by his personal grudge over Abiola denying him the post of running mate. As far as I was concerned, Paschal took the bitterness too far. He persisted in his refusal to use the Labour platform to save the mandate that 14 million Nigerians gave Abiola on June 12. Even when we, as part of SDP and civil society, wanted to defend democracy and the rule of law, based on the fact that MKO had won an election and deserved being sworn in as the President, Paschal turned a nonchalant shoulder. He was not interested. And that was why at that NLC council meeting, I exploded and decided to part ways with him. Thereafter, NUPENG issued its ultimatum.

This sent shivers through the spine of the government. Quickly, Abacha, knowing the relationship between Kingibe and me, sent him to me. Kingibe phoned me and invited me to his home at Victoria Island. I honoured the invitation.

Kingibe had been dealing with me for a long time. He hailed from Borno in the North-East and I from Delta State in the South-South. But after nearly a decade of our acquaintanceship, he knew what offers I could accept and those I would reject. I met Kingibe for the first time in 1988 when the Joint Action Committee of Nigeria

(JACON) organised a strike (after IBB dissolved the NLC), and the regime handpicked some eight Labour leaders for negotiations at the cabinet office. I went in the Labour delegation. Chief Olu Falae, then Secretary to the Government, led the government side, and Kingibe, as a Permanent Secreatry at the old cabinet office, came as Falae's deputy. There we met for the first time.

On this occasion when I showed up at Kingibe's home, he told me, "The Head of State wants you to withdraw the ultimatum. He wants you to come to Abuja to see him."

I retorted, "See General Abacha for what now? Chief M.K.O. Abiola has been arrested. The man is the President-elect and you are his running mate. So the best person Abacha should see is MKO - not me. Baba, you know this now. Why me? It is not me he should talk with, let General Abacha talk to MKO. The way they picked the man and locked him up just like that is not good. Once they release MKO then we can discuss. Even MKO *sef, me sef go talk to am*. Let him and this man talk, and then everybody can shift grounds a little bit. But at least let Abacha release the man and talk to him. Then we can be useful too. That is the best way."

Kingibe and I spoke for several hours but we found no meeting point. He particularly thought that it would make some impact should Abacha hear these words from my mouth. I felt it would serve no useful purpose. All I was telling Kingibe had been couched in our press statements and these had received wide media coverage. No doubt security reports too had made our stand available to General Abacha.

"I am not going to Abuja to meet the Head of State," I told Kingibe resolutely.

I felt that Kingibe should have directed his pleas to the Head of State— not to me. After all, he had personally told me that one reason he and other Abiola political associates had joined the Abacha

cabinet was to battle for the revalidation of June 12 from inside the government. However, as time dragged on, it had become clear that he and the other people merely joined Ahacha for their personal convenience. In government, they had failed to do anything for June 12. Right then, the country regarded NUPENG as the last-man-standing.

But government showed a different attitude to NUPENG's audacity. We had expected this. As we issued those ultimatums, we did not expect the military junta to treat us with kid's gloves. I would be a fool to so hope. I expected the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) or State Security Service (SSS) to storm my house. And I was prepared for such an eventuality. The ultimatum lasted seven days. Meanwhile, we had made preparations before issuing the ultimatum; my deputies and I went round to mobilise our members. As the zones were the main hub of oil workers' operations, we had agreed that I should go round the zones, while Akinlaja and Okougbo would hold Lagos. I traveled with my wife, Esther, not wanting to sleep alone in hotel rooms. Stories abound of many revolutionaries murdered and prostitutes and beer bottles planted on them, assailants would then expose the spectacle to the Press and successfully rubbish them. No way would I allow such a thing to happen to me. Even when I went underground, my wife came with me.

We had fixed the deadline for Monday 4th July, 1994, by which time I had completed my mobilisation of oil workers across the country. On the preceding Saturday, 2nd July, I stopped sleeping in my home. Even during NUPENG's economic struggles, I usually avoided sleeping at home in most cases, how much more now in a political strike, especially as we were up against a military junta in a Third World country. Immediately the action took off, I knew it would no longer be safe for me to sleep in my house, so I went into hiding on the eve of the strike scheduled to begin on July 4, 1994.

As if to justify my intuition, that same evening that I disappeared from my home, a lorry load of security men stormed the house. They arrested my wife's relation, Mr. Momah, a retired army Warrant Officer (WO2) visiting our family, and locked him up. They told him to reveal where I was but he said he had not seen me since he came. They threatened to keep him indefinitely in their cell unless they get me, but the poor man had been used to the military guardrooms during his service years, so it was no big deal to him. They got frustrated with him and after three days, they threw him out. However, his arrest afforded NUPENG the ample opportunity to sell a dummy; a revolutionary dummy. NUPENG went to town with the legend that government agents had arrested me. This gave me breathing space to properly operate underground to consolidate the strike, which quickly became biting.

Kojo Agamene and I moved into the same guest house, a moderately respectable complex owned by a Federal institution. From our hideout and secret operational base, we made links through my cellular phone, avoiding the use of the hotels' fixed landlines.

Because of the government's desperate action of storming my house, I kept away from the public. But I would always sneak out to meet my deputies, especially Joseph Akinlaja, whose residence in Surulere was most accessible from my hideout. My other Deputy General Secretary, Elijah Okougbo, lived several kilometres of uncountable police roadblocks away at Ipaja, towards the western outskirts of Lagos. Thus, it was more strategic to see Joseph Akinlaja, with whom I discussed and gave instructions. Even he, did not know my hideout. As the strike raged for several days, government made a lot of approaches trying to dialogue with NUPENG and the union honoured such talks. Although absent from such meetings where my people dialogued with these government representatives, I directed the negotiations by phone.

I had several hideouts, many of them small-time hotels. One was the Guest House of the Federal Institute of Medical Research at Yaba, Lagos. I booked into these places, using different pseudonyms. My regular one was Mudiaga Wilson.

Once, I went underground in one of these mushroom hotels in Lagos, booking under a fictitious name. My children dropped me off that night around 9pm and returned home. Suddenly, around 1 am, there came serious hammering on my door.

“Open! Open!” the voice of the assailants shouted.

My heart jumped into my throat. Fear gripped me. Had my cover been blown? Were these security agents, who would simply arrest me and take me into detention? Or were they hired assassins who would pump bullets into my body and disappear? Here I was unarmed and alone. My mind played with the possibility of jumping down and escaping through the story-high window, but I quickly discountenanced the idea. Instead, I kept praying in my heart. Yet the people knocking refused to give up. They kept retreating and returning, with their angry voices insisting I open the door. Within, I maintained solid silence. At a stage I thought they were going to force the door. Maybe somebody had sold me out. This assault lasted for about 45 minutes before they finally gave up. I waited for about 30 minutes before I called the reception desk via the intercom to demand an explanation.

“Oh,” the remorseful voice at the other end answered. “We are terribly sorry, Sir. It was a mistake. One of our female receptionists disappeared into a room with one of the guests and we were trying to fish her out.” My fears had been for nothing after all. But it underscored my decision to subsequently include my wife in my hideaway plans.

While I was underground, one day, Kudirat phoned to inform me about a white business partner of Chief Abiola who had come

into the country. Although seeming eager to help, he appeared to be tying his assistance to some conditions that Kudirat found hard to comprehend, so she invited me to hear him myself. I sneaked into Sheraton with Kudirat to see him.

Pa Enahoro, Prince Ademola Adeniji-Adele (former Chairman of Lagos Island and SDP chief) and Fred Eno (often described as the Personal Assistant to Chief Abiola) were in Sheraton. They had also met the foreigner. When I met him, the white man commended our efforts and said he had come into the country to lend a hand in promoting the cause of his friend. According to him, he and Abiola were partners in the oil business. He kept rambling on and on. But I conjectured he was an international oil speculator whose profits accrued from movements in the oil market; even a movement of 1 cent per barrel meant millions of Dollars in his pocket. He had come to convince us oil workers to bomb petroleum installations in Bonny Oil Terminal and Forcados Oil Terminal and the resulting explosions would shake the world oil market. He explained all this while I listened carefully. But he was talking to the wrong person. I was a Labour relations expert, not a terrorist. The people I led were nationalists and patriots who never intended to employ terrorism as part of our tactics. Without mincing words, I told off this white businessman.

“Look, my friend,” I addressed him, “If you are going to assist in this struggle as your friend is now in detention, you know what to do. The representative of your friend, his senior wife, is here. You are saying something else which is impossible to do. You saw that Lagos, is at a standstill because of the strike organised by us the oil workers, the whole country is at a standstill.”

He said, “Yes, the oil workers have tried—civil disobedience, beautiful. But you must also do this.”

“No,” I said. “That is not part of our agenda. If you are not ready to assist, that is up to you.”

Kudirat and I left his hotel room and sneaked out of Sheraton through the back door.

“Do you understand the man?” she asked.

I replied, “Yes, I understand him. You must have seen the way I spoke to him.”

I thereafter explained to her the atrocious acts of unpatriotic terrorism that the foreigner wanted to lure us into.

“These are people who speculate in oil. They want to make money from the blood of people.”

“The man is not serious at all,” she said, pointing out that her husband had greatly assisted the European in the past.

One other point, the man spoke about disrupting the upstream operations. But that never achieves immediate impact. Disrupting the upstream system would only affect government after about a month, because tank farms are usually filled with crude before lifting commences and then their volume remains constant for long. But with the downstream operation collapsing when the refineries and the tanker drivers stop working, the impact breaks out within 14 hours. Civil outcry quickly pours out with the disruption of the smooth running of the country—which was our aim, to make the country ungovernable through civil, non-violent means. Even then, once NUPENG calls a strike, all workers on the rigs and the flow stations fall in line and down tools. But I abhorred the act of blowing up a terminal. It would take not just bombs and dynamite. It would take lives. It would shake the world, yes. But it would no longer be civil disobedience. It would be terrorism, something I abhorred in those circumstances.

Later on, Agamene also met with the white man. He made the same proposal which Agamene similarly turned down.

All this time, I remained in hiding. My men kept in touch with me on the phone.

One day, a BBC Correspondent called me from London and she expressed a desire to feature our actual telephone conversation on the broadcast. In the course of the interview, she complained that my voice sounded too shaky and encumbered with static noise on her receiver.

“Don’t you have a landline you can use around you there?”

“The hotel people don’t know who I am, and their land phone is in the reception,” I said. “The type of place I stay, the handsets in the rooms are just intercoms. I don’t stay in top-class hotels where I can dial direct.”

She was insistent.

“Okay.” I finally said. “But will you give me your trust word that you will not betray me?”

“Of course, I won’t betray you,” she promised.

“Okay, take this number.” I gave the hotel phone number. “When you get the line, tell them you want to speak to Mudiaga Wilson, and they will call me.”

“You mean they do not know you as Frank Kokori there?”

“No! Nobody here knows me.”

Her long animated laughter wafted through the long-distance line. She was very excited and immediately she dialed the line. Fortunately, when the receptionist called me to take the call, no one else was in the lobby, for the strike had by this time made Lagos hotels grossly under-booked. I also spoke with CNN and other media in a similar manner.

However, I soon realised that things were reaching a dangerous dimension, especially with the government changing its stories and passing the buck about my whereabouts. One day, they went to town with the yarn that they had me firmly in detention, another time, they would deny that I was with them. It was getting to a stage where I knew that someone could easily blow my cover. Government

agents could easily have me assassinated and claim ignorance about my fate. Killings were already taking place.

The government had viciously put down a demonstration organised by the civil society groups, resulting in the killing of protesters and spectators. It was a rabid display of blood-lust.

Thus, I had NUPENG organise a world press conference at which I resurfaced. The event took place in Imoudu hall at the National Secretariat of the Nigeria Labour Congress at Yaba, Lagos. I came into the complex and headed straight for the office of the NLC President.

People waiting for the briefing to commence had expected the NUPENG leadership to come and provide an update on the search for their missing General Secretary. However, to the amazement of the gathering, as the NUPENG people entered the hall, right there in their midst was the missing Kokori. The whole hall went into ecstasy. I burst into solidarity songs and everyone joined in.

*We have decided to bring back freedom
We have decided to bring back justice
We have decided to bring back freedom
No going back- No going back.*

*There is victory for us
There is victory for us
In the struggle for Nigeria
There is victory for us
Forward ever backward never
In the struggle for Nigeria
There is victory for us.*

To my surprise and joy, Gani Fawehinmi was present and I saw him rushing to embrace me. It was an ecstatic moment for all present. After much singing, back-thumping and hand-shaking, I addressed the Press.

We soon found a problem on our hands. Outside the NLC grounds on the street, a small platoon of policemen laid siege. How would I get out of the place without them arresting me? But my people had taken care of that. They arranged about three vehicles in different locations. I got out of NLC into the first vehicle, and we sped off, shaking off our security pursuers before I changed vehicles somewhere. I changed vehicles once more thereafter. My son drove this last car.

The strike had been effective with everything paralysed. Terminals, oil depots, tankers, refineries, traffic, were all grounded. Captains of the civil society groups like Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti, Dr. Frederick Fasehun, Chief Gani Fawehinmi, Barrister Femi Falana and the militant Press were roused. They quickly came for meetings with NUPENG and expressed appreciation for our role in the struggle.

But I would always tell them, “You people deserve the greater thanks. In this ongoing struggle, we should thank the civil society and the Press more. It has been like putting two people in a war front against an aggressor having a gun. One of the partners has a sword, the other has a knife. You people in the civil society and the Press don’t even have a knife. We in NUPENG have no gun but a sword as represented by the oil workers; and it has proved such a powerful tool against the military.”

After I resurfaced, I began attending some of these meetings personally. Government proved unrepentantly intransigent. Government’s position boiled down to an unwillingness to hear anything about June 12. Neither did they want to consider the matter of releasing Abiola, something we in NUPENG considered the easiest condition they could fulfill. Being a trade unionist used to collective bargaining, I knew the union would usually begin bargaining from an extreme position, but in the course of time and meetings, union and management would arrive at a consensus. A unionist may start by demanding ₦10,000

basic allowance for a category of workers while the employers would offer ₦500. Both demands are extremist positions. How can union members earning ₦300 now talk of jumping to ₦10,000? At the end, maybe ₦3,000 may satisfy the union, not the ₦10,000 originally demanded. That is collective bargaining. I am a negotiator. With Abacha, we in NUPENG were ready to make some little concessions, which we did.

I knew too that the oil strike was biting very much. We in NUPENG felt reluctant to prolong the sufferings of the public that had been our greatest allies. But we never thought the strike would last more than three weeks.

We thought before then, everything must have ended, with the NLC joining us, thus bringing the government quicker to its knees and to negotiations. The fact was that, if the whole NLC had joined NUPENG, the government would have cracked much earlier.

Even the government recognised that, with a total nationwide strike, the civil service would be grounded, the oil fields and every other sectors would also be grounded, rendering the country ungovernable. Abacha would then be forced to call for real dialogue. That was our objective. At meetings, we made attempts to sensitise the NLC and other unions to this strategy. Unions are meant to fight injustice, to be on the side of the people. That is the philosophy of trade unionism. I didn't have to teach these comrades that. I am not the guru of unionism. These are basic things known to all leaders. Our NLC comrades were not small boys because many of them were university graduates—these general secretaries, presidents and chairmen — so they knew what they were doing, they knew that they should back NUPENG and the Nigerian people to establish justice and fair play. But anybody can be bribed and some received inducements to junk the struggle.

The Abacha regime also sent to me emissaries like General Patrick Aziza. Coming from a village close to mine in Delta State, Aziza must

have convinced Abacha that, being my fellow tribesman, he could convince me to soften my hard stance. But we had in fact never met. General Aziza connected me through Comrade Dan Nwanyanwu, a Labour leader and his erstwhile coursemate at the Nigerian Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), Kuru, Jos. Nwanyanwu used to be President of the Nigerian Union of Banks, Insurance and Financial Institutions Employees (NUBIFIE). He began to phone my mobile line, demanding to see me for an important message.

“Dan, you know my situation now,” I said. “I don’t come out anyhow.”

He pleaded and sounded desperate. This went on for days. Finally, I could no longer resist the pleas of this old comrade.

“Dan don’t betray me,” I warned. “If you betray me, NUPENG will kill you. Never you betray me.”

“Dan assured me he had no such intention, and that the Commander of the Lagos Garrison, General Patrick Aziza, wanted to meet me. Eventually, I agreed to meet him in a suite at Genesis Hotel. By then, we had opened Genesis Hotel, under the management of my wife, Esther, and my daughter, Cordelia. When suddenly they began to notice an unusual upsurge of patrons, we calculated that most likely they were security operatives trying to trap me, should I be hiding in the hotel. I would have been stupid to hide in my own hotel.

However, after Aziza gave me his word that he would prepare no ambush, we met at Genesis and he laid all the government’s cards on the table. He told me that government wanted me, as the head of NUPENG, to bury the hatchet and that all costs would be paid.

The man was practically offering me a bribe! I shook my head and politely told him I could not act unilaterally. Other emissaries came with other offers not worth recapturing here.

When all such entreaties failed, the Abacha government resorted to subterfuge and blackmail. It claimed my anger was a hangover from the last military regime that had wronged me by depriving me of a suitable position in OMPADEC. Abacha later sent secret emissaries to tell me I would be compensated with the post of OMPADEC sole administrator.

How could he so miss the point? The fight had nothing to do with Frank Kokori, seeking a private comfort zone. All we wanted was liberty and justice for Abiola and for Nigeria.

At a stage, I decided to get in touch personally with Major General Chris Alli, Chief of Army Staff (COAS). MC Alli had been Director of Military Intelligence (DMI) before becoming GOC, 1st Division and then COAS. I had once met him at Aso Rock, when General Abacha newly came into power. The government had called a meeting in February with captains of industry, players in the economy and leaders of Labour, three months after Abacha took over. People in the oil business came too. Chris Alli chaired that occasion. Those days, reciprocal communication went on between Labour and Aso Rock, and government functions always took Labour representatives to Abuja. This time, I was picked along with Paschal to represent the workers at this forum.

I was sitting at the same table with Paschal for lunch, when Abacha suddenly sent somebody to ask me to join him and Diya at their table. When I reached him, Abacha said, "You come and sit with us." So Abacha, Diya and I sat at the same table, eating and talking.

I suddenly became a toast of people at that forum. Many wanted to meet me, including ministers, military chiefs, businessmen and political chieftains, everybody. It was in this atmosphere that the Army Chief of Staff, Chris Alli, came to me, introduced himself and said, "Frank, we should be in touch." And he gave me his phone numbers.

Thus, when this political logjam became rough, I felt like speaking with Chris Alli. One day, I searched for the complimentary card that he had given me at the forum and called his line. I told him: “Look, we do not mean through this action to cripple the country. At this small basic demand, we are not saying June 12 must be actualised immediately. We only say you should release Chief Abiola and open dialogue with him.”

Most likely Chris Alli was receiving my call on an open land-line and our conversation could not be deep. He spoke guardedly: “Please, try and call off the strike. We should meet again. Let us meet somewhere else.”

I thought to myself. “These people are not serious.”

My move to reach out to the Chief of Army Staff had been made because I felt he could influence the government since we, on our part, had made a concession. Instead of making the wholesale revalidation of June 12, the condition precedent to suspending the strike, NUPENG only canvassed for MKO to be released for dialogue with the junta. With that, the nationwide tension would dissipate. That was the resolution of NUPENG, which I had discussed with my President. This was a strategy. With Abiola out, other things would follow naturally.

But I began to perceive an uncomfortable trend in my conversations with government negotiators. They were all waving off the release of Abiola. Kingibe had sidestepped the matter. So did Aziza. And now Chris Alli was doing just the same. Why were they recalcitrant about that particular matter of granting Abiola liberty? When I demanded dialogue between him and the Abacha government, it was not as if we insisted such talks should lead to the immediate actualisation of June 12. But basically, I wanted Abiola out of incarceration: for when there is life and liberty, then there is hope.

The government’s unwillingness to release MKO, was the reason we refused to withdraw the strike. Life was the most crucial thing. If we could not as much as secure the life and liberty of the man we set

out to fight for, then why had we taken ourselves and the country through all the trouble of the past months? It was better to die than to have our struggle thus fruitlessly aborted. It would have ruined my name and the name of the union forever.

I decided we must not suspend the action. By this time, pro-June 12 hawks had come to roost in the union and given a no-retreat, no-surrender encouragement to NUPENG, insisting that the oil workers' strike must proceed indefinitely. So we kept up the strike. Whenever my people spoke to me, they kept encouraging me.

“Comrade, the struggle continues.”

To sustain the action, they usually called me sometimes to alert me of possible betrayals. I told them just what to do to counter threats from blacklegs threatening to break rank. At different times, I circulated memorandum to the oil workers through my deputies.

The strike proved very biting and its indefinite nature made things particularly harrowing for the country. Finally, the regime caved in. On a Saturday, the government flew a Judge from his home in Benin to Abuja to grant bail to MKO. However, MKO refused the conditions attached to the bail offer, which included travel restrictions and a relinquishing of his mandate.

Six

NUPENG SLAMMED! KOKORI NABBED!

On August 17, 1994, the crisis reached a crescendo after General Sani Abacha, by fiat, dissolved the executives of NUPENG, PENGASSAN and NLC, because of the crippling oil strike. He personally went on air to justify the action. NLC, NUPENG, and PENGASSAN had their National Executive Councils dissolved by Decrees 9 and 10 of 1994, with union leaders denied access to union premises and bank accounts. Check-off facilities were also withdrawn from these Labour organisations. General Abacha immediately appointed administrators for the hammered Labour unions, which saw Dr. Usman Jalingo taking over as sole administrator for NUPENG.

Abacha's move caught me gasping with surprise, as it were. He was writing a strange chapter in Labour history, slamming three Labour organisations in one fell swoop. And where did that place me on the side of history? Our agitations had precipitated the dissolution of NUPENG's leadership. In an environment that extols might as right and where the rich and the mighty rewrite history to favour themselves, would history record me as being in the right or in the wrong? Agamene and I (both of whom had returned into hiding long before that pronouncement) sat down to review the situation. I told my President, "What is your reaction?"

And replied, “Do you want us to call it off? What do you have to show for all these days: all the inconvenience; all the risk; all the sacrifice? No, we must fight on.”

His determination surprised me. Despite being a well-paid worker in the oil industry, the man showed an unexpected readiness to die for the cause. His commitment encouraged me a lot. I don’t know what I would have done if I had been all alone at that crucial moment of the struggle. The ban had been so unexpected that it would have drowned my determination in despair. As they say, two heads are better than one, and Agamene at that crucial moment provided a worthy anchor for me.

Pa Enahoro had always inspired me with his courageous spirit and words of timely wisdom. Enahoro immediately phoned me and encouraged me, “The Commander-in-Chief’s address was based on you, so it shows that you are something to this country.”

My zonal chairmen quickly began ringing me to say, “No way! We are ready to fight to the end.”

But we had one fact to contend with. Lagos was getting too hot for us (for me in particular), especially in the light of the Head of State’s announcement of NUPENG’s ban. Agamene and I held a long strategy session. The only way to sustain the struggle was to escape the groping arms of Abacha’s hunters and remain in touch with our men on the ground, that way, we could keep the lines of communication open to our men and issue instructions to them as well as get situation reports. We concluded that we should move out of Lagos to Port Harcourt. The first leg of our exit from Lagos would entail us moving to Warri in different vehicles, not our normal cars. Thereafter, we would go to Port Harcourt, the centre of Nigeria’s oil industry. Once there, underground, we would show ourselves to our people, like the NUPENG zonal council leaders, in order to reassure them and keep up the fight. Unfortunately, it did not work out that way. That night, a Judas, betrayed me and Abacha’s men captured me.

NADECO and most concerned Nigerians phoned my mobile number to encourage me over Abacha's hammering of NUPENG. Callers included people like Chief Anthony Enahoro, Chief Segun Osoba and other SDP ex-governors. On my cellular, I granted interviews to BBC, VOA and other international, as well as local media. The callers insinuated I was the last man standing, and my arrest would virtually inflict incalculable damage to the struggle.

At about 9.30pm, somebody rang me (I think it was Segun Osoba or Doyin Okupe, as both of them rang me that night) to drop this piece of unsettling information.

"Frank, you have to take your security very seriously now. Don't let anybody know where you are. They have picked up Chief Cornelius Adebayo, Prince Ademola Adeniji-Adele and Pa Enahoro. Adebayo just went to see Pa Enahoro at Sheraton Hotel when he was picked up as well. You are now the soul of the struggle, please don't joke with your security."

They themselves did not know my whereabouts. I had moved from the guest house that had hosted me for long in Lagos to another one. I had my wife with me. Throughout the struggle, I had drunk from Pa Enahoro's courage and wisdom. His arrest meant I had lost a significant pillar of support. At that stage, it was very difficult for my wife and me to find sleep. We were helpless. What should we do?

Before SDP, I really did not know Segun Osoba one-on-one. Like Kingibe, he had good human relations. If he happened to be absent when you phoned him, even as the Governor of Ogun State, he returned your call as soon as he got your message. You could not but like such a fellow.

While I was in prison, Osoba went out of his way to assist my family. He visited and donated. However, on my release from prison, I heard this strong rumour that his betrayal, led to my arrest. As far as I know, Osoba did not betray me. I don't know the brains that planned the betrayal, but I know the person who lured me out from my hideout —and it was not Chief Segun Osoba.

I had concealed my hideout from everyone, save my wife and children. The SSS hovered around Genesis Hotel and my house those days. My family members had cause to suspect they were being tailed, thus, they took extra precautions not to give away my hiding place. My wife went to great lengths to conceal her tracks while coming to my hideaway. She usually had someone drive her to one of the popular markets in Lagos — Idiro, Mushin or Tejuosho. Esther would enter the market, return to the parked car to take something and enter the market once more. Going through this motion a couple of times, she would finally sneak out of the market passing through a much different exit and casually take a taxi. She alighted from the hired cab some distance from my chosen hotel and stroll into my hideout. She could spend days in my company.

When I emerged from my hideout on the night of my capture, it was on humanitarian grounds. What happened was this:

On that night of 19th to 20th August, 1994, around 11pm, a voice started calling me, saying, “Please, tell me where you are staying.” It was Fred Eno.

His request sounded strange. None of my callers ever asked me to disclose my whereabouts. Although in his 30s, and by far younger than the key elements in the struggle, Fred Eno was an Abiola confidante and Personal Assistant. He played an important role, coordinating media contact for the struggle.

“But you know I can’t come out. How do I tell you where I stay?”

He said, “Please. The issue now is that Pa Enahoro has been arrested and he had handed some important documents to me. But my own life is in danger too. I can be arrested anytime now. Pa Enahoro says I must personally give you those documents.”

Eno had struck a significant chord, for the rule and strategy of struggles and revolutions stipulate that if a team member falls, another must take over his role immediately. If Pa Enahoro had fallen, someone must quickly stand in for him.

I remember too that my cell phone, a Motorola Workhorse, had all that day been malfunctioning. Unknown to me, the phone was being scrambled. The audio was poor. I had earlier laid this complaint to Fred Eno and he promised to source a good replacement for me. It was up his alley, being MKO's public relations person.

Meanwhile, I suggested Fred Eno take the materials to my daughter at Genesis, but Eno declined. According to him, in the light of the NADECO chieftains' arrest, the whole of the Ojuelegba area, bordering my hotel buzzed with SSS operatives. Once they saw him, they would pick him up too. "My life is in danger," he said.

Along the line, strangely, my cellular phone became clear; crystal clear. I could hear Eno very brightly. I could feel the desperation in his voice, almost as if we stood face to face. I could feel the tearful emotions in his voice. He sounded close to tears. I succumbed. I directed him to my hideout, which was Domino Guest House, owned by Ben Bruce's Family. A small decent place with no more than eight chalets, Domino Guest House was very neat and exclusive. My President had separated from me and stayed at a different guest house to prevent the possibility of our being arrested simultaneously.

"Okay, meet me in front of Niger Palace Hotel, Yaba.

When you get there, ring me up."

"I will be there before 11pm," he said.

He was not there by 11pm. I kept calling him, "Where are you now? You said you will be there before 11pm."

"I am on the way," Eno assured me. But now the hysteria appeared to have evaporated from his voice. He sounded more stable, more confident.

Some minutes before 1am, his final call came. He said he was some 50 yards from the Niger Palace Hotel, waiting for me in a white Mercedes Benz. But it was so late – usually I never ventured out of my hideouts at such a time.

My wife was sleeping soundly, laced with medication the family doctor said would help calm her stress-fired blood pressure. I left the room. At the reception, I woke up the boy on duty and asked him to escort me to the Niger Palace Hotel where I needed to bring some people who would be lodging in the guest house with me (actually, I had planned to help Eno get accommodation in the guest house. It was a safe haven to which no one would think of searching for him). I led the way towards the Niger Palace Hotel, and the boy followed from a distance.

Shortly, in the midnight shadows, I saw a White Mercedes Benz parked close to the hotel. Sure that it contained Fred Eno, I keenly approached the vehicle. The back passenger door opened as I touched the flank of the vehicle. The other side opened too. Then I found hands grabbing at me. I quickly back-pedaled. Too late! The hands found me and eagerly pounded me with a rain of heavy blows. They tried pushing me into the Benz, but I held on to one assailant's shirt.

The boy following me quickly retreated, standing away in the shadows. From there, he saw everything. That saved him and helped my case. He must have heard me shout.

"I am Kokori!"

"I am Kokori! I am not a criminal! They are trying to kidnap me!"

We struggled. Something told me that my assailants were security agents. They were big muscular creatures and I so diminutive, but they could not overpower me. Like a frenzied demon, I fought viciously against all attempts to push me into the car. I held on to the open car door. One of them left the fray and moved to the back of their car. He opened the car boot and returned with a spray gas that he sprayed into my face. The pungent chemical stunned me and momentarily knocked me off balance. They immediately bundled my slack form into the car. The struggle took not less than two minutes.

Engines revved into life. Tires screeched. Two cars flew out of the shadows into the night, one contained me, in the company of

people I by now guessed, formed a squad. A special squad. In my own vehicle were four men. The other car followed with two or three more men. They threw me on the floor of the vehicle and sat on me. Two of them sat on my tummy, with their combined weights, pinning me down to the car floor. I was still conscious but could hardly breathe. I gasped for breath. Were these the throes of death? For a brief moment, some life came into me and I spoke hoarsely,

“My death will set this country ablaze!”

Somehow, I had managed to say the right thing. Since the strike was on, I had strong confidence in NUPENG. Despite the government’s hammer, NUPENG and PENGASSAN had maintained the strike, and effectively, even though NLC had been all along reluctant to join the latest fray. I was confident my death would spark that fire of Labour solidarity nationwide. Injury to one usually amounted to injury to all.

“My death will set this country ablaze!”

My statement stung my assailants into wakefulness. It frightened them, so I could see. They immediately raised themselves off me, giving me space to push myself on to the car seat. I sat up. Then they began to sweet-talk me.

One of them had the temerity to speak my native Urhobo language to me, telling me there was no cause for alarm. The impostor! Would an Urhobo man join hands with others to mete such a harsh treatment out to his own kinsman? Impossible! His voice really grated my frayed nerves. I ignored the impostor. I kept mute.

“Frank Ovie Kokori,” another one said. “What beautiful names!”

Seven

FRANK OVIE KOKORI

Mother told me that I acquired the name Franklin from a white missionary doctor in charge of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Maternity Hospital, Igbudu-Warri in today's Delta State of Nigeria. Popularly called Bethel in those days, this maternity hospital was the place of my birth on 7th December, 1943. The white doctor must have had ardent admiration for America's President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945). He christened me after that great Statesman. My birth came during the period of the Second World War, just when the Allied powers led by USA, Great Britain and the USSR started rolling back the earlier victories of Nazi Germany's satanic Fuehrer Adolf Hitler. The only American President in history who served four terms in office (in 1933, 1936, 1940 and 1944), Roosevelt, started the 'New Deal' programme, a comprehensive series of measures designed to bring immense relief to the 'forgotten man.' I would like to believe that apart from inheriting his name, I inherited his altruism. Many of us in the Labour movement have his heart. We remember him as the American President who openly encouraged the organisation of free Labour unions. He believed that free and independent Labour unions were a characteristic of free and democratic modern nations.

I also pride myself having as namesake, Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), that great Philosopher and Diplomat of the American Revolution. He was a most extraordinary man usually remembered

for negotiating the treaty of commerce and defensive alliance with France, which represented the 20 points in the American Revolution.

I had other icons too; great names like Winston Churchill, Charles De Gaulle, Kwame Nkrumah, Pundit Nehru, Mao Tse Tung and Jomo Kenyatta. Then we had our own Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo and the Sardauna, Sir Ahmadu Bello. All great men of their era, they commanded my admiration. I always wondered whether I could be as great as any of these political icons.

When growing up, I admired Tom Mboya, Labour leader, top politician and the Golden Boy of Kenya. He fell to assassins while serving as a young Minister. But he had grown to become a very successful man at a very early age and was being groomed as future President of Kenya. As a young man, Tom Mboya bore the sobriquet “Golden Boy of Kenya Trade Union.”

In Nigeria, the man to take as our Labour Leader Number One is Pa Michael Imoudu, because of his commitment to workers’ welfare. Despite his limited education, he demonstrated great commitment to the struggle of the working class, thus he towered above every other leader of his time. He showed a lot of truth, dedication, commitment, sacrifice and deprivation.

However, without doubt, the leader I love most in this world is Nelson Mandela. I cherish his pattern of principled struggle, which I’ve acquired. Actually, I gained a lot from him. Study Mandela himself, you will find this man as highly principled. Born in Transkei, South Africa, on July 18, 1918, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela qualified as a Lawyer in 1942. While serving a five-year imprisonment handed down to him by the Apartheid regime in 1962, Mandela was in 1963 again brought to stand trial with fellow leaders of the Africa National Congress (ANC) for allegedly plotting to violently overthrow the government. On June 12, 1964, Mandela received a life sentence.

From 1964 to 1982, he served time at Robben Island Prison, and thereafter at Pollsmoor Prison. Mandela finally regained freedom on 11th February 1990, was elected President of the ANC in 1991 and in 1994 was elected the Nation's President in South Africa's first multiracial elections. He served until 1999, when he handed over to Thabo Mbeki.

Nelson Mandela laid down his life for his people and took a great risk. At the time his travails began, Mandela had a standard of living close to the Middle-class in South Africa because he had a flourishing practice as a young lawyer and solicitor. But then he gave up everything and went into the struggle. When he was to be sentenced, it was obvious to him it would be death or life imprisonment, yet, he was still bold to make a patriotic statement in defiance of the authorities. Mandela was very unlike other examples of leadership in the Third World, which thrives on opportunism. He sacrificed everything and today he has reaped his reward. For me, he is the only man I feel has endured. Nkrumah is another of my icons. He proved to Ghanaians that he is the greatest leader. But there is no other leader in the world I really admire like Nelson Mandela.

That I bear Ovie today actually came in a roundabout way. My native name was Ogheneotshuko (God is my Refuge). But I came to believe I should not bear a name too hard to pronounce and spell for people outside my ethnic group. Thus, up till my days at the University of Ibadan, I bore Oghene. It came down to the same abbreviation. F.O. Kokori. However, my mother frowned at me bearing Oghene. Oghene means God. Being a very religious woman, she felt it blasphemous that people should call me "God." I pointed out to her that countless Urhobo people answered Oghene. She said those people did not know what they were doing. This was around 1973. So my mother prevailed. I would not succumb to

take the complete form of the name Ogheneotshuko. So we came to an agreement that Ogheneotshuko and Ogheneovie, God is King, symbolised the same thing. God is King was an even greater name. But it became another long name. We agreed that it could be shortened to Ovie. This made my mother happy until she died in 1988.

My parents at the time of my birth made home in Sapele, the famous bustling port-town of that period. Produce merchant with the French firms of SCOA and CFAO, my father, Chief Robinson Viebinene Kokori (from Kokori/Ovu) had been very successful at this trade before his fortunes crashed around 1949. My mother, Rose Otovbiere (Nee Ogomugo) from Agbarho was the second of four wives. My father was about 49 years old at the time of my birth. Mum was only 25.

I was barely five years old when in early 1948, my mother and my immediate elder brother (Willie) led me by the hand to start my ABC (kindergarten) classes at Saint Andrews (CMS) School, Warri. William, four years my senior, was already at Saint Andrews, so I had no problem adjusting to school life, with him always being around to direct me. Warri of those days came across as a very important commercial port town where the Christian missionaries flourished and the people eagerly embraced the good things that Western civilisation offered. I finished my primary education at Saint Andrews in 1955, the take-off year of Chief Obafemi Awolowo's famous Free Primary Education, the revolutionary education programme in the then Western Region of Nigeria. So I benefited from that programme for only one year.

Two years of pre-secondary classes at the famous Dibua Preparatory classes, popularly known as "Dibua's Lesson" (the place also bred famous "Wafi Boys" like Vice Admiral Preston Omatsola who retired in 1993 as Chief of Naval Staff, Dr. Abo Tabiowo, a top

Management Executive at the NNPC and Chief Martins Esiegbe, a prominent transporter in the oil industry), then I found my way to secondary school at Urhoho College, Effurun-Warri between 1958 and 1962. But it was at Eko Boys High School, Lagos, that I finished secondary education in 1964 after I left Warri to stay with my father's eldest son, Samuel Kokori. I also attended the University of Ibadan (1974); Fritz Herkert Advance Labour College, Berlin, German Democratic Republic (1979); International Institute for Labour Studies, Geneva - Switzerland (1981); and the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague - Netherlands (1983-1984), where I obtained a Master's Degree in Development Studies.

Eight

FROM SHANGISHA TO ABUJA

For a long time we drove in silence. Finally, I gave voice to my nagging thoughts: “You people could be armed robbers. Where are you taking me to?”

After the first checkpoint around Anthony Village area of Lagos, at which they flashed an identity card and police waved them on, one of my captors said: “Do you now believe that we are not armed robbers or fake policemen?”

Finally we reached the SSS office at Shangisha, just off the Lagos end of the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway. They told me to surrender everything I had on me, I did.

My possessions comprised a cash sum of ₦1,270, my wristwatch and my NUPENG identity card.

My captors went to a refrigerator and took out some drinks.

One asked: ‘Do you want Coke?’

“Forget about Coke,” I said.

They offered me a bottle of cold water, urging me to wash my face.

Thereafter, they took me in their vehicle and drove out of Shangisha. We went through the Third Mainland Bridge and arrived at the SSS office at Awolowo Road, Ikoyi. There they left me at the reception. The wall clock indicated 2am.

The special squad transferred my possessions (the ₦1, 270 cash, my wristwatch and my NUPENG identity card) to the officers at Awolowo Road and drove out of the premises. They must have felt very proud of themselves.

Thus, left alone, I had time to think. My mind kept rewinding and replaying over and over that midnight's mishap. I was angry with myself. Till today, I still feel anger over my capture. The way these security agents cheaply caught me brought me waves and waves of regret. Simply put, I had held the opportunity to prevent my capture at my fingertip and yet I threw it away. Several times during the years of the Cold War, I had attended trainings on revolutionary struggles in Russia and other Communist countries in the Eastern Bloc. Those programmes in the mid and late-1970s brought me together with African comrades struggling to gain Independence from the colonial and Apartheid regimes in their homelands. They undertook instructions in arms combat, guerilla tactics and various other aspects of armed struggle.

Beneficiaries usually included South African comrades from the African National Congress (ANC), Movement for the People's Liberation of Angola (MPLA), South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) of Namibia, FRELIMO of Mozambique, ZANU-PF from Zimbabwe and others. The Eastern Bloc countries gave not just moral support and training to those beleaguered Africans, but extended to them financial assistance and secret supply of arms.

I always thought myself fortunate, coming from a country that had already secured Independence. As a result, I showed no interest in the armed aspect of the training package, strictly devoting myself to ideological and developmental studies. Whenever the freedom fighters went for training in the handling of small arms and bigger weapons, I refused to participate. I told them my country was independent, so what was the use of training in arms handling?

Those were the days of the regimes of General Yakubu Gowon, General Murtala Muhammed and General Olusegun Obasanjo. Throughout their years, they ran administrations easily described as benevolent military dictatorships. Under them, my country and countrymen enjoyed freedom. These regimes did not lock up people anyhow. No wonder people like me could travel out through the international airport to anywhere we wanted.

But with my capture, I realised what opportunities I had frittered away all those years. Had I had a crop of armed men guarding me at my secret hideouts, those Abacha dogs could never have so cheaply arrested me. With 10 armed men guarding me, these Abacha men would not have dared touch me. If they tried, there would have been a shoot-out and we would all kill ourselves there. Then the whole world would have known that we died in the struggle for democracy. That was the type of thing I wanted, not to be just captured cheaply. I felt humiliated.

When I sat there on the bench in the reception of Awolowo Road SSS office, Prince Adeniji-Adele came as if on the way to the toilet. It looked like he did not recognise me. I thought to myself: Why this pretext? Here was a fellow politician who knew me very well and usually came to my house. I could not understand why somebody who usually treated me like a senior brother at SDP functions suddenly now fail to as much as give me any sign of recognition. I initially thought he was cowed by the SSS environment.

I said, "Prince, how?"

It was then that he replied, "I wanted to confirm whether it was you or not."

He managed to greet me and disappeared again. He must have gone to relay the news to his fellow captives inside, because one of the junior SSS boys soon came and whispered to me, "Enahoro and Adebayo say I should greet you and tell you sorry."

I did not understand why people in similar trouble as I was would be telling me sorry. Only much later, when I looked into a mirror did I know the reason.

All I knew was that my face stung. Later, I felt my sight beclouded and I could not see properly. I saw an Assistant Director going into one of the offices and asked some of his subordinates to tell him I would like to see him. He took time coming. Well, I had to help myself as much as possible. I told one of the staffers to help me buy eye-drops. Just at that moment, one security chief was passing by and, overhearing my request, began walking in my direction.

He said, “You shall get a doctor.”

True enough, a female doctor soon came. She took my BP. I told her I was hypertensive and had traces of diabetes. After I furnished her with the names of the anti- hypertensive drugs that I normally used, the doctor immediately sent someone to buy me drugs with which she treated me. She also gave me an eye solution.

The young boys kept pestering me about my welfare.

“Oga, go and bath.”

“We will go and buy some food for you.”

But throughout that day, I could only manage to eat once. They were surprised that I failed to eat. A few hours after I was brought in, one of them came to me.

“Oga, scribble something to your family. Scribble anything, so they will know you are here.”

I wrote something on a rough sheet lying around with a pen he pressed into my hand. I later learnt they took the note to my home. In the morning again, another person came and gave me the same instruction. I wrote another note – that made two.

While in Bama, I was to remember the humane treatment I got at SSS, Awolowo Road. I always told the initially cruel Bama Prison warders, “If I had been in a Southern prison, they would never have treated me the way you people are treating me. You can’t tell me that

because you are taking orders from above, you are dehumanising me. If I were in a prison in my own town Warri, Sapele, Lagos or anywhere else in the South, they would not treat me so badly like this.”

The Awolowo Road SSS junior staff really accorded me respect.

I remained seated on that bench right where my abductors deposited me. Later, someone I guessed was a more senior officer came in and he must have seen me dozing off where I sat upright.

“Chief, you can lie down on the bench,” he said.

I shunned him, silently determined to sit upright like that till morning. Later, he came to lead me to a disused office, where he said I should sit on a sofa. In that office, I slept through the night till about 6am. I slept throughout Saturday too.

On Sunday, they led me out of confinement. Surprise, surprise! Guess who I saw. Fred Eno! So Eno was also in their net? He looked disheveled. Up till then, I had not set eyes on Fred Eno, whom my mind conjectured had betrayed me. His desperate phone calls for help had led me out of my safe hideout into the special squad’s trap that fateful Friday midnight.

Somehow providence showed her hand. As we began to leave SSS Awolowo Road, the boys sneaked me my watch and ₦500 from the ₦1, 270 my captors had given them as part of my assets, telling me that I should “just hold this.”

It later proved a fortunate gesture; other secret agents along the way thereafter felt that since I had gone through a thorough search during my arrest, they did not need to search me again. I had that money on me in Abuja for five weeks, initially spending none of it because SSS provided everything I needed. But that money would later save my life in Bama.

Our captors took us out of Ikoyi in a convoy of vehicles with armed guardsmen. Eno, Adeniji-Adele and I rode in the same Peugeot estate car. Eno sat in front with the driver. Sandwiched by

two rifle-clutching soldiers, I sat in the middle seat. Adele rode on the last seat with some other uniformed person.

With the petrol strike still biting, Lagos roads were empty. The convoy took us to the Presidential Wing of the Murtala Mohammed Airport, Ikeja in record time. I earnestly yearned to ask Eno what happened. But people were there. He could not really speak.

“We shall talk. We shall talk. I will explain,” was all Eno said.

In the Presidential Wing, one sight encouraged me and bolstered my spirit. My abduction made headlines. Thank God, the newspapers captured my arrest. The world knows my story. I was particularly happy that people knew that I was with Abacha’s people. The security people there at the airport allowed me to read newspapers there. The Punch reported exactly what happened. One of the officers gave me his copy. That paper is still with me. The headline was: ‘Kokori Now Captured’.

I later learnt that the hotel boy who followed me ran back to the guest house when my assailants laid hands on me. He immediately woke up my wife, who raised an alarm.

Our captors flew us out to Abuja in a Presidential Jet. It was one of those 737, an executive plane with ample facilities for such luxuries as a cocktail. It did not have the usual rows of passenger seats facing forward to the cockpit. Instead, the seats were arranged around tables, just as in a living room. This special plane had the country’s coat of arms. The government had elected to use it in order to keep us out of the reach of the public.

When I asked for permission to clean up in the rest room of the Presidential Wing, security officers directed me to the rest room; a very neat place with mirrors all over the wall. As I looked, a stranger’s face stared back at me from the mirrors. Eyes were bloodshot. Face bloodied. Lips swollen. My lips swelled up like a battered boxer’s, with blood stains running all over my cloths. I could not believe that was me. It was the first time I would be seeing a mirror since

my Saturday night ordeal began. No wonder Adeniji-Adele failed to recognise me at the SSS office. My face looked terrible and pitiable. It took five weeks of treatment to regain my normal facial features.

My Guinea Adire tie-and-dye kaftan had torn. Nothing then told me that that torn dress was to remain on me, unchanged, for one hundred days.

I finished cleaning up and returned once more to join Eno. With all the security people breathing down our neck, we could not talk, although we were sitting together. But nothing could change my belief that Eno was part of the game.

The security agents took us (Eno, Adeniji and me) from the Abuja Airport to the SSS Abuja Bureau. Thereafter, they dispersed us, taking Adeniji-Adele out in a vehicle to an unknown destination; we later learnt he landed in Kaduna Prisons. Then they dispatched Eno to somewhere within the SSS complex.

As for me, they kept me in a disused wireless radio room; the place looked like an abandoned operators room. An air-conditioner kept my temporary cell a bit bearable. A three-seater settee provided my bed. When it was time for food, they took my orders and brought me whatever I wanted to eat. Whenever I felt like easing myself, I banged on the door that they opened and locked from outside.

Two days later, top agents told me the Head of State had taken particular interest in my case. With that, they transferred me to a police-type cell, with the usual steel door and bars at the pigeon-hole windows. Very dirty, the cell stank. They evacuated its usual tenants; some armed robbers, and made some effort to clean it up, using detergents and disinfectants. But like a leopard that never loses its spots, the 12 x 10 feet cell retained the putrid smell of faeces and urine. It was nearly perpetually dark; a real dungeon. The agent placed a big mattress on the floor and locked me in there. Through the netless wide pigeon holes at the top of the cell, a ferocious army of mosquitoes launched unmitigated attacks at me in the dark. I

had nothing to protect me from these winged attackers and I complained to the Head of the section who promised to get me a bedsheet. Apparently, these conditions were intentionally designed to break me.

That place was a dungeon and they threw me there purely for torture. These masters of torment aimed to psychologically break me down. No communication. No bulb, no light, total darkness. Slowly my health gave way. My BP rose. My temperature shot up.

In that state, I needed all the welfare assistance I could have. I needed my family. That made me write a letter to the Commander-in-Chief (the security agents told me that anything about me was to be addressed to the “Commander-in-Chief”), applying for my family to be allowed to see me. Thereafter, no one ever mentioned the letter or my family’s visit to me. The spineless Head of the Bureau there, a chap from the South-West, was so fearful of the consequences that he plainly refused to take any initiative. As no reading material was allowed, I asked for him to give me a Bible. He promised to send one and never did. And he professed to be a Christian.

There was one young junior agent, a graduate from the North, who appeared friendly. One day, I asked him if it was possible for me to take a bath. Warning me that I could not get a decent bathroom, he arranged to bring boiling ring and bucket from home, which he did that same evening around 8pm, long after civilian staffers had closed for the day. The whole place had a deserted look.

I went behind the complex to a dark, unlit part of the offices and took my bath, watched from a decent distance by armed operatives. It was my first bath in 12 days.

This kind agent was a Muslim, but I asked him for a Bible and he went to town and borrowed one for me. Later, I asked for novels. He gave me one book on the KGB. Later, he brought others.

On my third day in this torture cell, the operatives opened the cell at I am and ordered me out. I was about to face my first

inquisition. They led me into a heavily lit room. My eyes felt a sharp stab, blinking heavily to adjust to the sudden barbs of light. It was a KGB, Gestapo-style intimidation. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw six men seated on one side of a table just opposite me. The interrogation began but the way they went about it did not win any respect for them from me.

They brought their useless form, directing me to fill in my background and everything about my life. I thought they would be making enquiries about Labour and Industrial Relations. No. They had other things in mind.

“Your National Executive Council, we are told they all signed to agree on the strike, what are their addresses, their names?”

“Where is the home of your President?”

“Where are the homes of your deputies and all the leaders of NUPENG? Give us their addresses.”

I said, “I don’t know their addresses offhand. But do you really think if I know the homes of these people who collaborated with me in this resistance, that I will give you their addresses?”

They laughed and said, “You don’t know the people you are dealing with.”

Here I was, abducted and locked up for leading a national strike, yet the country’s dreaded Intelligence outfit queried me about unionists’ addresses that they should normally have at their fingertips. But they had just begun. They shoved a sheet under my nose containing a list of landed properties that Frank Kokori supposedly owned in Lagos - choice properties in Ikoyi, Bourdillon, Lugard, Gerald, Maryland and other such places. It was clear they aimed at blackmailing me on being an acclaimed Labour leader with secret affluence tucked away in real estate. Where did I get the money to build them?

They sneered. “Pretender! You have a lot of money and property, yet you call yourself a Labour leader?”

“I don’t answer silly questions,” I said and pushed the sheet back at them.

“Why do you say that?” one asked.

“Because you people know my apartment in Surulere where you always visit and my flat where you always conduct searches. You know the old house I have in Surulere. If I had all these landed plots in Lagos, would I be staying in rented flats in Lagos? I really have no time for this type of enquiry. In any case, these buildings have addresses, go and acquire them, confiscate them and sell them, see if the owners will not sue you people.”

Confusion and embarrassment covered them as they glanced at one another.

I made them look stupid. They conferred and then bounced back: How long had I been in NUPENG? What had I been doing?

Suddenly from one end of the table, one of them thundered: “How can you lead a union for 16 years? You have been the Secretary General of NUPENG for 16 years, why didn’t they vote you out?”

Silly question! They had not even studied the NUPENG constitution, or that of any of the country’s 41 other unions for that matter.

I said, “Well, go and meet the NUPENG people and then go and read the NUPENG constitution. That is not my business. If the workers say I should lead them, then, I will continue to lead them, that’s all.”

After grandstanding some more and seeing that they made no impact on me, they directly threatened me.

I told them: “My friends, I am already in chains, what worse thing can you do?”

My reaction shook them. They conferred silently amongst themselves before finally, the leader asked me, “You mean, ehm... now we are asking you privately... You mean, you don’t have any property in Lagos apart from that your old house?”

“I don’t”, I said, “That is the only house I have; that old house at Surulere. I am only committed to this struggle. You think I can be pretending as a union man?”

They exchanged glances of wonderment and admiration. It was like saying: This is an amazing person; a man made famous by his service and activities in a union that dominated the petroleum industry, the Golden Goose of the Nigerian economy, and yet he had not gone on an acquisition binge!

Later, when I left prison, my Comrades and family revealed that the security operatives came to my home and office, bandying fictitious bank accounts and alluding them to my name.

The people there that day were the hardest. They were the real Abacha fanatics. Eventually, I had to caution their Head: “If you continue like this, I will not say anything. Go ahead if you want to kill me.”

And thenceforth, I refused to answer those silly questions.

I told the Head of the panel: “You ordered me kept in that dungeon. The condition is bad. I will not beg you. But it is bad.”

In the morning, they brought a doctor to the dungeon to examine me. SSS operatives would usually stand with the doctor, giving neither him nor me any breathing space.

“The whole country is behind you,” the good doctor whispered into my ears, and quickly busied himself; taking records of my body rhythms and vital statistics. I told him I was a diabetic patient needing special diet.

“Sorry,” he said, “Here, you will only eat whatever they give you. You can’t help that.”

I saw three doctors in that time I spent with the SSS. The friendly one was a Southerner from the Cross River axis. Other doctors did their job mechanically and left. But this one had a personal, human and humane touch.

At the time he came, my BP and temperature were very high and he must have brought this to the attention of my captors. This apparently provoked a serious debate among them. Those of them who did not want me to die in the place mounted pressure and finally had their way. With that, they let me out of the dungeon and returned me to another disused office.

Thank God for all those three doctors that saw me at SSS Abuja. They displayed immense kindness to me. While examining me, the 'Calabar' doctor slipped into my hand hand written notes containing Bible quotes. One quotation I remember very well is Hebrews 10:38.

"The just shall live by faith alone."

I spent five weeks in that place. Then one day, one of the friendly boys hurried into my temporary cell and whispered urgently.

"Take everything you have. Take everything."

Nine

BAMA NIGHTMARE

There was a bang, and the door was flung open. As the security agents walked me from the cell to the main block, there sat Eno in the waiting room. They took me past him into one office. After another round of interrogations, I was led back to the reception where security agents in their suit and their dark glasses littered the whole place with their presence.

In no time, a convoy took Eno and me to the airport once more. I silently hoped our destination would be Lagos this time around. But nobody would talk to me. We again took a presidential jet where everybody sat wherever he preferred, but the security operatives kept us under close watch. Knowing the Lagos route so well, my mind calculated that, in one hour, we should be in Lagos. One hour went by and still the plane failed to lose altitude and remained in flight. This took me aback.

I looked through the plane's window and I saw Sahara grassland. If we were approaching Lagos, we ought to see dense and thick vegetation below. Instead, the vegetation thinned out, becoming more and more desert-like. Then I knew that these people were taking me to a Northern jail: it would be either Bama or Gashua. It meant that my punishment had just started. My heart sank.

The plane finally descended and taxied to one end of the airport, far off from the normal passenger terminal. Welcome to Maiduguri

International Airport. A Peugeot Station-Wagon drove up to the gangway. Leaving Eno in the plane this time around, our captors led me out of the plane.

All the things they took from me, which included the balance of my money, N770, and my NUPENG identity card, my Abuja handlers hand over to their Maiduguri counterparts. Thereafter, the agent that accompanied us from Abuja handed me over to my new caretakers.

He said to me: “Anywhere you go, I know God will be with you.”

I said: “Are you afraid?”

He replied, “No.” Then he added, “I will tell you later.” But he never told me what he had on his mind.

The presidential jet taxied down the tarmac and flew away with Fred Eno. Fred Eno was later detained in Enugu Prison and secured his freedom in June 1996.

NOTE

I never met Fred Eno or heard his version of this depressing episode of my arrest, until 12 years later, when we met for the first time at ceremonies for the burial of Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti. At subsequent appointments, Eno told me that his voice was mimicked by the security agents that night, something that some people say is impossible. Till date, I never believed his story. He may have been used, because it was too real.

My new custodians took me out of the airport in their vehicle in silence. As usual at that time of the year, maiduguri was under an oppressive heat. Maiduguri is Nigeria’s frontier city on the North-East axis, close to Nigeria’s border with Chad Republic. We soon got to the SSS Headquarters in the city. Opening their fridge, the agents asked if I would take anything. I requested for cold Swan water.

It proved to be a short stopover. Within the hour, we drove out again. Accompanied by a man dressed in the green khaki uniform of the Nigerian Prisons this time, the security operatives took me in a Station Wagon about 70 kilometres to Bama town. They said nothing. I was sad and I did not talk.

The biggest industry in Bama was the Bama Prison. A very old prison, it sprang from ancient times when Emirs ran the jailhouses in the North. Thus, jails were built adjacent the Emir's palace. It was a convenient arrangement. The Emir held court in his palace, so convicts were simply marched next door to begin serving their sentences. When the British came, they adopted these prisons and simply improved upon them in space and architecture. Made from burnt bricks, the high walls spotted barb-wires only part of the way.

We reached Bama Prisons at 5.30pm on 22nd September 1994. There was no arrangement to receive me, as officers did not know the calibre of their new 'VIP' detainee. The last 'VIP' prisoners they had were Mr. Turner Ogboru and Professor Tam David-West.

The single cell in which they proposed to keep me was foul, much worse than where Abuja SSS kept me. I learnt it was a punishment cell reserved for offending inmates who committed offences like drugs trafficking, stealing and fighting. Such offenders could be chained to the floor and the wall. They also used the place to harbour sick and lunatic prisoners. Urine and excreta littered the whole place as those held there also answered the call of nature on the spot. It was worse than the concentration camps in Germany. During the Cold War years, Germany threw open these camps to visitors; I visited the place and saw the camps. I have also seen Goree Island, off Dakar Senegal, the last point for African slaves going across the Atlantic to America. Indescribably inhuman, both places were stinking and uninhabitable. This Bama cell was worst off.

When the warders went to inspect the place that evening, I suppose that they themselves felt uncomfortable with the prospect of keeping me there. The officer in charge of duty wanted to take the matter to the higher ranking Deputy Comptroller in charge of the prison, but found he had traveled out of town. The third man in the prisons command came around 6pm and the Chief Warder alerted him on the dilemma in which they found themselves about my accommodation. Because they knew the gravity of keeping me in that place, warders of all ranks quickly rallied round. A serious debate raged over my fate. But the key question remained: If they must not sentence me to that pigsty, where else could the prison accommodate me?

In the compound, a new building stood in preparation for use as a model kitchen. It was roofed. Normally the prison's cooking took place in a makeshift kitchen, a shed constructed with wooden poles and corrugated iron sheets. They used firewood for cooking there. But this kitchen under construction would use gas. I was then kept in the store, a small 10 x 8 space that had iron bars and its wooden windows and doors. The warders finally decided to confine me there in this small building. They gave me a mattress; one paper-thin foam, not more than one-and-half inches thick and 28 inches wide. No bedsheet; no blanket.

Later, I had to grapple with the matter of provisions. The normal thing was for prison authorities to make contact with the family of a detainee just landing in prison, so they could bring him provisions. But this did not happen in my case. I only brought a polythene bag containing my toothpaste, toothbrush, towel and bedsheet, bought for me by the SSS in Abuja. Those were all my possessions, apart from the dress I wore.

After Deputy Comptroller "Musa" (not his real name) returned from his journey, he agreed to loan me some money for my drugs. However, after obliging me my initial requests for loans, prison

authorities suddenly clamped up and my subsequent applications for loans went unheeded. I later learnt that the government wrote the prison soon after I arrived, telling officers to treat me like an ordinary criminal and accord me no concessions whatsoever.

With that, the prison heads immediately began to make arrangements to remove me from my temporary abode in the new kitchen, to the stinking cell. They were, however filled with sympathy, knowing fully well that the place was a real dungeon.

The prison warders were worried. I believe they knew the adverse implications of keeping a sane person in such a cell. The next day they made herculean attempts to clean the place. All their efforts yielded little improvement.

Then one of them came to his senses and said: "If this man dies in our care, we are the ones whom they will query first. So let us call the Principal Medical Officer for his opinion. If he says we should put him there, then we will put him there. If he frowns at it, then we have a good excuse to keep this man from that horrible place."

That was how they allowed me to sleep that night in the uncompleted kitchen complex.

Nevertheless, one thing worked in my favour. Before the SSS operatives left me in the prison, I had alerted them of my health condition, saying: "Look, I am hypertensive and diabetic, if I am not properly handled. Please, could you ensure that I have medical treatment?"

The security agents had then given orders to the Chief Warder: "Make sure you tell the Principal Medical Officer in this area to be seeing him."

In the government-owned medical centre in Bama town, Dr. Danladi headed the unit as the Principal Medical Officer. Next in rank to him was Dr. Aina, a Yoruba man from the South-West. I learnt that even the indigenes had become fond of Dr. Aina, who had worked longer in the establishment. Because Dr. Danladi was a

home boy, he was placed above Dr. Aina who was not an indigene. In ordering me to see only Danladi, apparently the security agents wanted to keep me from any contact with southerners.

They made sure I had no access to southern warders, doctors and operatives. However, from the Principal Medical Officer's very first session with me the next day, I found him a true Christian, a good and objective person. Trained at Ahmadu Bello University, Dr. Danladi proved civilised and independent. I told him my medical history.

With the prison staff standing around us, he took my BP and my temperature and found they had both gone haywire. When asked for a medical opinion about the habitability of the single cell, Dr. Danladi volunteered to conduct an inspection of the proposed accommodation. All the prison officers trooped after him. According to information later relayed to me, the Doctor stepped into the cell and immediately rushed out.

"The man is not going there!" he said with finality. "Do they want to kill him? They want to keep a man in there till he dies?"

Everybody stared at him as he continued, explaining that if I was to inhabit that cell, it must be reconstructed with bigger windows on opposite or adjacent walls to allow for cross ventilation. The floor must be plastered over with cement, and so on and so forth. Officers immediately told him he was requesting the impossible. Even then, "Musa" the Prison Head said I must go there as he could not put his job on the line by granting me liberties.

According to what my prison boy later told me, when he tried convincing the prison heads and found them reluctant to change their chosen course, Doctor Danladi blew his top and stormed out of the prison premises, pouring invectives in Hausa as he left: "If they want that man dead, they would have simply shot him, nobody would have questioned them. But they brought him here because

they don't want his death. Do you want to kill him now that he is beyond their reach? If they brought him here and said I am the only Doctor that can see him, then I say NO! He should not go to that place."

Against this backdrop, the prison authorities allowed me to sleep one more night in the unused kitchen. After some few days, the Doctor came back again. This time, they told him to put his recommendations in writing. He promptly did. I love the man, he wrote down everything. I remain eternally grateful to Danladi for this. Right from Abuja, the doctors were well-learned. Oh, don't joke with them. They were not afraid. In fact, such treatment made me to respect doctors. Most of the doctors really did lived up to their Hippocratic Oath and failed to kowtow to inimical pro-establishment politics.

Dr. Danladi's letter provided enough escape route for this cowardly Deputy Comptroller "Musa."

On the Doctor's written recommendation, the Deputy Comptroller retained me in the unused kitchen and started allowing me a special diet. In the morning, they ordered for me vegetables and other edibles. As usually done to detainees, they assigned two warders to watch over me. We could not communicate. But then, it is hard before you get a guard that can speak English in Bama.

However, they delegated an inmate, Steven Yohanna, to serve me as my prisoner-steward; he could communicate in English.

In that kitchen store, I had the small bed they provided, while a long low bench served for writing and dining table. For my meals, I sat on the bed and placed the plates on the bench.

There was no mosquito net in the windows. My first two days in there, I was peppered by heat and mosquitoes. To my amazement, the mosquitoes attacked in a platoon.

So much did I dread life in the single cell that throughout, I kept praying that the prison would not get the expected kitchen equipment. And God heard that prayer. Until I moved to a new, more habitable cell, they never cooked in that kitchen.

When the material for the prisoners' uniform arrived, prisoners skilled in tailoring were immediately dispatched to measure inmates and sew their uniforms. The Chief Warder said they would not sew one for me. Of course, not really being a convict, I should not wear prisoners' uniform. He then gave me the white khaki material to use as bedsheet. Upon my release, I succeeded in smuggling it out of the prison. Today, I use it for my aerobics.

After about two weeks, on 17th October, all facilities were stopped, as another letter came again, reiterating the earlier instruction that the prison treat me like an ordinary prisoner that; authorities should take me back to that dreaded dungeon and stop all my privileges. They quickly changed my food to Tuwo, which is ordinary guinea corn, gulped down with terrible soup and as Black as herbal concoctions. I tried it, but quickly spat it out, finding the soup the most displeasing experience I have subjected my simple palates to in their culinary history.

I embarked on a hunger strike which eventually weakened me; and coupled with my health problems, I was almost dying. However, the warders and my boy came, trying to placate me. The boy attached to me, Steven Yohanna, pleaded with me to take something; that it was better to survive, than to die in prison.

Unfortunately, at the end, my hunger strike looked like a fruitless exercise. Bama is much unlike a prison in Lagos, Ibadan or Benin, where people get wind of such a development and the Press can sensationalise it. Bama was total isolation. What is the use of a prisoner's hunger strike if it fails to get the attention of the media and the outside world?

SSS had ordered me removed to the dungeon. But the officers in the prison still had their senses, they promptly sent for the Medical

Director once more. The Doctor said I should be well-accommodated and well-treated, but the state operatives said I should be kept in harsh conditions.

I even pleaded for them to put me in the general cell, which looked like a dormitory, serviced by kitchen boys and cleaners. But they refused. According to them, the prison could not disobey government's orders to keep me in the single cell. The prison authorities harbored a mortal fear of the SSS. And these ones had issued specific instructions to punish me.

My worst fear sprouted from the putrid smell of human waste that pervaded the single cell. All my life. I never liked the idea of flagrantly handling faeces. Even as a free man, I normally had a running battle with my doctors whenever they told me they needed my waste for testing. It would normally get me pleading with them to use my urine, saliva or even blood. Now I was going to be breathing, sighting and smelling shit, 24 hours.

At the end of the day, the prison forcefully transferred me to that cell and my health quickly broke down. My BP rose very high, my temperature shot through the roof. My BP is always quick to react to situations. I never fake it. It saved me in Abuja, and it did now in Bama.

My plight especially touched the crop of younger subordinate officers. They happened to be graduates and proved to be bolder. Their immediate boss himself, DC Musa, was equally well-educated and in addition, he had overseas exposure. But he chose to behave cowardly.

"Musa" claimed to have known me as far back as the 1980s. He used to be Borno State Chairman of NLC in the 1980s. In fact, at our first meeting in the prison, he told me: "Frank Kokori. I knew you even before they introduced you. When we sat on the floor during NLC conferences, you people were the NLC big men on the high table."

But he had a problem: An attitude problem. He simply felt inferior to the SSS. He manifested this by his inability to take initiatives. Today, I still find it hard to understand why a good man would obey bad orders. On the basis of obeying instructions from above, “Musa” deprived me the barest basics of life. Any instruction coming from those quarters, dismally timid “Musa”—in his grave fear of the SSS — would usually readily implement, even at grave danger to his charges. As Head of the prison, he overruled many of my rights and carried out whatever the SSS told him beyond the mandate. Can you imagine him telling the whole yard that nobody should talk to me? And a lot of people kept to his instruction, thus throwing me into complete isolation.

In fact, “Musa” took to deceiving me, asking me to write letters through the Comptroller in Maiduguri: letters that never got replies. Thereafter, when I raised the issue of my getting no reply, “Musa” told me that the Comptroller of Prisons was the one stopping my letters. In fact, I later learnt that “Musa” never forwarded those letters.

When the Doctor came this time, he took my BP and I told him to remove me from that sordid cell and he said, “I already made a recommendation that you should not go there.’ The authorities themselves informed him that they had transferred me. The Doctor said, “Have you renovated the place with big windows? Have you changed the doors and everything?” They said no, that they were not prepared for such a venture. Moreover, they would not even be able to do any major renovations because those were stone buildings, embedded with iron doors and bars.

The Doctor stood his ground, saying, “A place without ventilation? You know that the man is hypertensive, and you want to take him there? No way”!

Secretly, the prison officers endorsed his position. In their heart of hearts, some of the warders were good people and they somehow

allowed the Doctor's arguments to moderate how they treated me. My hunger strike lasted three days. It however achieved some useful results. For one, the prison officers consented and deleted Tuwo from my meals. They resorted to allowing me tea that I bought myself and beans from the prisoners' menu. Inmates ate meat only twice a week and they promised to give me some small ration of meat. However, in line with the SSS directive, they promptly stopped loaning me money. From that time, I used my small secret store of cash to buy bread, which I ate in secret.

That small amount of money that I sneaked into Bama was what saved me. It also facilitated contact with my wife and family. This latter miracle, Steven performed for me.

Steven Yohanna, aged about 28, hailed from Gwoza. Bama and Gwoza used to be part of Northern Cameroon. Steven was like one of the senior boys of the prison yard, having been sentenced by an Alkali Court to 10 years for stealing. A Christian, he was one of the few who spoke English. Many of the prisoners and warders could not speak English and Hausa. In fact, 90 percent of Bama warders, apart from the educated, even ASPs, could not communicate in English. Steven quickly helped me to master the ropes of prison life, sneaking pen and paper into my cell. He organised how I secretly sent out letters to my family. The first left my cell on 19th October and left Bama on 21st by post. From my secret ₦500 fortune, we facilitated the letter's journey with ₦100 speed post.

Four days later, my wife and son, Franco, rushed down to Bama, because before now, my place of detention had been a government guarded secret. Disappointingly, the prison authorities did not accept anything from the vast provisions my people brought, this at a time I badly needed money for food and for drugs. In fact, my people were told I was never brought to Bama. You know the most painful aspect? My son and my wife stood outside Bama Prison gate, crying. Yet, these people would not budge and allow them in.

Ten

FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD, WITH LOVE

Probably dancing to the prevailing attitude of the SSS, the prison authorities told Esther and Franko that they knew nothing about any Frank Kokori. The warders claimed I had never been posted to Bama Prison.

Some officers later told me: “We are following orders from above. They warned us that if anybody outside knows you are with us, we will lose our jobs.”

Meaning, if I died there, no one would know. That is why I remain eternally grateful to Steven for sneaking out those letters to my family, unknown to the officers, thanks to Steven’s ingenuity, my people had seen my letter in my own handwriting. My wife insisted they were lying, but the warders stuck to their guns and refused all my family’s entreaties to see me. Such frustration filled my wife and Frank that they broke down and wept bitterly. Never had I been absent from home without a message. Even when overseas, I would at least phone, if for any reason my wife did not go with me. It was not my first time of being incarcerated, but this was the longest. Worse still, neither my family nor any of my associates could speak to me behind bars. It had never happened.

My people finally left the gates of Bama Prison and went into Bama town. Eventually, they succeeded in linking up with some contacts that could access me. Esther and Frank stayed in Bama

for one week and they were exchanging letters with me through our contact.

Another fellow I will always remember of my days in Bama was a Kanuri, who had gone out of his way to befriend me soon after I landed in Bama. Adams Nbusibe soon proved to be a God-sent. This son of a wealthy man who was an indigene, courted me in a shrewd way. He was popular in Bama because he was generous. Operating in the petrol business, Nbusibe was generous and normally gave the warders money.

Adams Nbusibe told them he would like to meet me. They told him that was impossible because I was a high-profile detainee held incommunicado, with even letters to my family blocked in order to keep my whereabouts secret. But he insisted, claiming he had been classmates with one of my younger brothers in Kaduna. Finally, one of the sympathetic officers, who happened to be his friend, informed me of Nbusibe's request. We arranged he could visit this officer and then I would be summoned before the officer for some vague official reason.

Initially, Adams aroused my suspicion. Was he an SSS Agent assigned to extract information from me? I decided to play along. However, a few minutes with him showed me he was genuine through and through. His questions were not implicating. My answers revealed nothing.

Soon he began smuggling newspapers, magazines and novels to me – all at his own expense, tipping warders to bring me these treasured contraband items. He smuggled *The News*, *Tell*, *Tempo*, all of them papers in the struggle. These were my greatest needs then. They helped me maintain my sanity, keeping me abreast of the rest of humanity. You will perhaps understand better, my craving for publications if you realise that it took me six whole days to learn of Kudirat's death in June 1996. A prisoner went to the clinic and Dr. Aina told him to tell me of the assassination of this 45-year old

Amazon. That was a most sorrowful moment for me in gaol. Later, I learnt that Alhaja Kudirat Abiola had twice made the trip to Bama in order to see me, but she had been denied access.

Meanwhile, through my first contact, my people made contact with me. It gave me no small measure of peace, knowing that they at last knew my location.

By then, I had a little over ₦100 on me. Such a financial position gave me cause for concern. But Steven performed yet one of those his timely miracles.

He used secret sources to bring in money from my people. I hardly believed it the day he brought me the money. A whole ₦5,000! That singular financial breakthrough that Steven brought gave me the greatest single source of hope in that place of darkness.

After spending a week, my family left Bama on 6th December, 1994.

Subsequently, I lived a bit more comfortably. Whenever, I bought something, the prison officers asked: “How did you get money?”

Until that ₦5,000 came, I had taken only tea because I could not eat the prison food they provided. I bought bread that I ate in hiding. It was a bitter experience as I became very skinny. I was so sad.

We agreed my wife and children should not bother making another frustrating visit. Instead, they should try to penetrate Abuja and bombard the public and the Lagos Press with intensive propaganda, exposing my presence and my condition in Bama. It worked. The subsequent Press exposures were so authoritative that the government had no option than to allow them free access. Even then, visits proved to be a long ordeal of bureaucracy and red tapism.

My wife would come to Maiduguri where authorities at the states prison headquarters would flash a message to Bama Prison. The prison would then alert the local SSS. In their official vehicles,

SSS men and prison warders would then take me to the state capital where I would meet my wife in an office in the full glare of a village - sized crowd of spectators that would include the Comptroller, the Deputy Comptroller, the police representative, the state SSS operative, the Bama SSS operative and the warders. About a dozen onlookers would be watching me and my wife converse. In such an atmosphere, what could we say? They insisted we must speak in English. They were so bad and inconsiderate. Once in a while, I would throw in one or two Urhobo words. Of course I was happy to see my wife. And anytime she left, I became very sad. Those her visits left me unfulfilled and unsatisfied, like a premature ejaculation. Apparently, the State agencies chose to treat me like the worst terrorist that ever walked the face of the earth. They committed themselves to denying me privileges that even common criminals enjoyed.

I had only a handful of visitors, basically restricted to my immediate family, and they must first get the clearance of the Comptroller of Prisons. The most frequent was Esther, my wife. She usually came with one of our children and a relation. NUPENG's first President, Comrade Enas Dubre, visited. One of my boys from NUPENG, Lucky Edaferoro, an Assistant General Secretary, once came with my wife. My elder brother, William Kokori, came too.

When the gates finally opened for her to come to Bama Prison to bring me provisions, she landed with goods, a virtual mini supermarket, much of which I could not consume myself and gave out to warders and prisoners alike. No trip cost her less than ₦50,000. Even then, Esther would lodge a cash sum of between ₦15,000 to ₦50,000 in my personal prison account.

On a typical visit, she came with the following supplies:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------|
| 1. Quaker Oats (large tin) | 3 tins |
| 2. Nido Powdered Milk (large tin) | 2 tins |
| 3. Bournvita (large tin) | 1 tin |
| 4. Custard Powder (large tin) | 2 tins |

5.	Tinned fish (Mackerel)	12 tins
6.	Sardine	12 tins
7.	Tomato Puree	12 tins
8.	Vegetable Oil	1 gallon
9.	Raid Insecticide	1 gallon
10.	Sugar (St. Louis)	2 Packets
11.	Corn Flakes	6 Packets
12.	Lipton Tea	4 Packets
13.	Maggi cubes	100 cubes
14.	Vim	1 Packet
15.	Tooth paste (Large)	1 Packet
1 6.	Detergent (Big sachet)	1 Packet
17.	Oranges, Guava, Plantain, etc.	
18.	Onions, Garlic, Apples	
19.	Rice, Beans, Asala, Potatoes	
20.	Curry, Thyme	6 tins
21.	Pilchard	12 tins
22.	Blue Band	1 tin
23.	Cabin biscuit	2 Packets
24.	Imperial Leather	1 dozen
25.	Mobil Insecticide	1 dozen
26.	Matches	10 boxes
27.	Baked beans	6
28.	Toilet rolls	
29.	Goya Olive oil	2 bottles.

My family brought me clothes, drugs and other things. They even bought me a stove. All along, I had personally had to hunt for firewood for cooking. From that time on until my release, my family came regularly, deposited money and a huge load of provisions. Also, this era saw government giving orders that I should be fed with special diet - at my own expense. As long as I had money, I sent my Prisoner-Steward to the market to get me goods.

I took my breakfast between 7 and 8am and the last meal between 1pm to 3pm. In most cases, I did not eat more than twice a day. This is an interesting development, as I shunned the native foods served by prison. But when my family started seeing me, there was too much food and I discovered I could not eat much anymore. The doctors always told me to eat, so I tried to eat twice a day. I had the provisions but I was rarely hungry. Up till date, I don't take more than two meals a day.

They prepared for me any type of food that appealed to me. I had vegetables almost everyday and this helped control my diabetes. I normally cooked green, and a lot of tomatoes with rice and Tuwo Dawa. There are two main types of ground cereals. Tuwo Dawa comes from guinea corn, while Tuwo Masara derived from corn-maize. There are others, but Tuwo Dawa is the most popular. Initially I would not touch any of them, but finally I came to know that if properly prepared, Tuwo Dawa is a very good meal with good soup. Brabissco is their favourite food in Maiduguri. It is cooked with owab stem skin which is, very very black. In the market, chicken sold for between ₦200 and ₦300 and I frequently take them.

Once you are a political prisoner and you have your money, you can buy anything. In fact, I came to own a fan in prison. In my first three nights, I went through hell from mosquitoes taking advantage of my being without a fan or a mosquito net. But at the Doctor's insistence, the Deputy Comptroller got me a standing fan and mosquito net, courtesy a loan from what they called "Labour Money," the prisoner's common purse. When prisoners earn money working outside, the prison keeps such money. In 1990 North, convicts were still contracted out to private farms as cheap labour. One baton-armed warder could lead about eight prisoners to a farm for about ₦30 per prisoner- per day. Of this sum, the prisoner would keep 50 percent in his prison account and the prison kept the other half of the income generated. Such money went into augmenting the personal provisions of the earner.

My wife later bought another standing fan for me. But in the heat, the fans became useless as they blew only hot air. Putting on a fan then punished you more. At such a time, I had to unplug the fan.

From February to June was hell in Bama, so was the period September to October. But from November to January, we enjoyed the Harmattan coolness. Then in June to August the rains come heavily. Thus, six months of the year, I found my cell very okay. The remaining six months, it was hell. Those six “heat” months in the year usually dragged on like eternity. This was the most impossible time for me in prison. When that weather came, the prison authority would occasionally provide me with cold water from the lone prison refrigerator. This refrigerator is carefully tucked away in the D.C office. They made ice blocks for me by putting water in a plastic bag inside the freezer overnight. In the morning, I put this in my cooler and had iced water for about 12 hours. This helped me a great deal in the oppressive heat.

The day breaks at Maiduguri very early, say about 5am, when the Muezin start calling Muslims faithfuls for prayers. I usually woke up at 6am. Then my guards would come at 6am to see if I wanted to use the toilet. I preferred using the pit toilet, called the “Detainee’ s Toilet,” instead of the chamber bucket. I try to keep it neat always. One thing about the prison yard is that there are so many people doing labour, and always scrubbing and washing when ordered. After visiting the toilet, I brushed my teeth, took my bath and walked round. On days I did not feel up to strolling, I lay or sat down and simply watched prison life unfold around me. The Political Detainee rarely does any physical work. But the prison has so many prisoners doing work, that the whole yard looks spotless. For people like us, these prisoners would wash and iron our cloths. And when you give someone ₦10 for these chores, he regards it as very big money.

Two warders were attached to me and initially one or both always followed me everywhere. Very unusual. Towards the end of my stay, that arrangement was scrapped. Later, only one warder was attached to me, but he was not following me around. Ordinarily, It was not supposed to be like that . In the prison yard, you were supposed to be free. Warders could be watching the inmates, but their presence would not be visible.

Eleven

PRISON ROUTINE

In prison, little things you would normally take for granted quickly took on great significance. I saw the hand of God in my digestion. At home you will find it no big deal having a running stomach in the middle of the night; you simply rush to the toilet. For me as a prisoner, toileting at night turned into an ordeal. I did not fancy the idea of discharging my waste in an open bucket in my cell, and laying with it overnight. The idea of having a warder escort me, then stand guard over me as I did the most basic thing in nature, put me off because I still cherished my dignity. In that kitchen-convert cell where I stayed for 26 months, there were no toilet facilities. I used the pit toilet dug by Turner Ogboru (held for his brother, Great Ogboru's alleged role in the Gideon Orkah coup against Babangida) and maintained by Professor Tam David-West (former Minister of Petroleum Resources under General Babangida). If I wanted to use the toilet, I knocked and the warder guarding me would come and let me out. Somehow I controlled my feelings myself in order to avoid going to toilet in the night. Throughout my two years in that cell, only once did I wake up in the night to ask the warders to escort me to the pit toilet. For urine, I had a small plastic container that I used in the night and emptied at daybreak, but I could not imagine storing my waste in any container at night, then carrying it through the prison yard, with inmates staring at me. The thought demoralised me. It was ridiculous.

One thing that lifted my spirit and dignity was worship. Christian prisoners had a fellowship. Their muslim counterparts had theirs too. Usually, relevant clerics came from outside to hold services with inmates. Prior to my arrival, two Christian boys from Edo State doing the National Youth Service (NYSC) usually conducted the prison fellowship. I decided to join in their fellowship. As we gathered for the programme the first day I attended, with these NYSC boys present, there was a sudden movement of warders who immediately encircled us, standing at strategic positions. Apparently, they wanted to monitor and censor whatever the corpers would say.

It had never happened. The prisoners and corpers had before then enjoyed real and unhindered freedom of worship. My boy whispered to me that the warders came there because of me. It was the last time the youth corpers were allowed to enter the prison. With the banishment of these NYSC boys, I found myself elevated in the fellowship since I was the only in-house Elder. As a result, whenever our brethren from town (for other servants of God still came after the NYSC chaps left) failed to turn up for any reason, I would preach the sermon and then someone had to interpret in Kanuri.

However, the warders' display of suspicion and hostility against me did not last the first year. Later, some of them mustered the courage and became my friends. It could not but be so, for my oppressor soon became their oppressor too. This became so when a ₦17 measure of guinea corn jumped to ₦80. The warders felt the insensitivity of the government to the plight of the masses and they began to complain.

One of them said: "This regime is for Generals and Emirs, not for us poor people. The people enjoying this regime are Generals and Emirs."

They went as far as acknowledging people like us as 'crusaders.'

One even told me: "You are a really important person. I hear

your name all the time. I tune to Radio France, I hear your name. I tune to BBC, South Africa Radio, Switzerland Radio, German Radio, everywhere I hear your name.” World focus beamed heavily on Nigerian detainees in those days.

Eighteen months into my incarceration, my health took a terrible turn. The injury I sustained in the Sagamu accident as SDP Administrator in 1992 began to play up, it affected my spinal cord that I could not move. My head felt very heavy and my neck felt as if I bore the weight of the whole world. Sleep fled me. Immediately, I complained to Dr. Danladi, who wrote a letter through the Comptroller of Prisons to the SSS that I be allowed specialist treatment at the University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital. The Comptroller of Prisons in Maiduguri quickly endorsed the letter.

Sick prisoners having no independent money get the most minimal of treatments. The dispenser at the prison health facility can only give for free, nothing more than Paracetamol and other common drugs. For heavier prescriptions, the prisoner pays personally. As a result, many political and wealthy prisoners usually assist sick prisoners to buy drugs and meet other needs. I did. However, sometimes in the absence of such assistance, very sick prisoners die.

A prisoner’s death is a non-event when it occurs, fellow inmates may be the first to discover and immediately report the development to the warders on duty. The warders simply cover the corpse with his sleeping blanket and lodge a report with the Head of the Prison. He calls Bama town’s Medical Director, who comes to certify the death. Wrapped in his blanket, the corpse is borne by inmates to the local cemetery for burial. It is such a simplistic process.

I had witnessed this indignity a few times that when I learnt General Yar’Adua died in prison, I quietly prayed that Abacha would release his body to his family for a decent burial.

In reality, prison authorities do not want the death of prisoners in their care. Thus, as a rule, in order to prevent death by poisoning,

anyone bringing cooked food to a prisoner must taste it in the warders' presence before they forward it to the prisoner. Warders even donate their meager personal funds to transport a prisoner to hospital whenever necessary. And when doctors recommend a prisoner for admission, he goes on admission immediately.

Before Abacha's callous brand of incarceration, this privilege had been extended to political detainees. In the Buhari-Idiagbon era, political detainees like Governors Ambrose Alli and Bisi Onabanjo were placed on admission at the University College Hospital and the Lagos University Teaching Hospital respectively. Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, jailed on money laundering charges in that same regime, spent a long time receiving care at the University of Maiduguri Teaching hospital.

Finally, towards November 1997, the government granted me the long-awaited permission to undergo treatment at the University of Maiduguri Teaching hospital. A military platoon of about 20 soldiers squeezed me into a van and escorted me on the about 70 kilometres journey to Maiduguri. Bama, being a border town, had a full complement of security personnel, a fraction of which was conscripted to accompany the pick-up vehicle borrowed from the local government to transport me to the hospital. Some policemen, soldiers and warders sat with me in the pick-up. The platoon followed us in the van. Why the government nursed so much fear about me in particular, I would never understand. I could not understand why I was the only one left in detention among all the NUPENG and PENGASSAN executives that were detained on January 4, 1996, the government released four of our five union leaders held without trial since 1994. Those released included: My fellow June 12 collaborator and NUPENG President, Kojo Agamene; E. Iregha, a PENGASSAN Branch Chairman; F.A. Addo, first Vice-President of PENGASSAN and Port Harcourt Branch Chairman; and F. Aidelomo, PENGASSAN Group Chairman at the NNPC. But just three weeks later on January 25, 1996, the government arrested

and detained the General Secretary of PENGASSAN, Milton Dabibi. He had remained in hiding for much of the time since my arrest in August 1994.

We got to University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital and the military escorts immediately took over the whole UMTH complex. Even when I needed to strip naked for examination in the consulting room, they would not grant me and the doctors the privilege of privacy. The doctors would look up and their eyes would clash with those of SSS, police and prison personnel.

Finally I could not bear it any longer: "Is there no privacy here?"

The Doctor muttered: "We can't do anything about it." This is a shame. All this show of power and gallantry by the Nigerian army just for a fragile looking and helpless Comrade Frank Kokori? It is unbelievable.

"Can't you speak as a Doctor? Doctor, you can tell them to give you some privacy."

It was obvious the medical personnel were thoroughly intimidated at the siege. All sorts of assault weapons, sub-machine guns and automatic pistols were struggling for recognition in all directions in the Doctor's consulting room. All the corridors had strange faces adorned in camouflage uniforms, turning UMTH into a virtual war zone.

I had come, packed and ready to be admitted. I actually prayed that UMTH's hi-tech equipment would unearth a condition in my body that would provide me the excuse to savour a non-prison environment, a deodorised hospital environment, for the first time in three years.

Till today, I can swear that the medical specialists discovered something serious, but they decided to ignore and overlook it. The Medical Director called the senior doctors together and they went into a meeting where they reviewed my case. Finally, they called me into the board room. My shadows, the soldiers, immediately, infiltrated the place and took position.

“Well, your condition has been caused by exhaustion. It comes from your long stay in an immobile position in detention. This has caused your spinal problem to resurface from those days of the motor accident you said you had before. The type of bed you are using in prison has also made matters worse for you.”

The spinless Medical Director, was afraid and did not want his premises militarised. Despite seeing me bent double, and pain visibly coursing through my countenance with every effort I made to change position, he was now tactfully washing his hands off me.

“The day you are set free, you will regain yourself,” the Medical Director submitted.

I look back now and know clearly that the Medical Director had put politics over profession. The man had simply played Pontius Pilate and washed his hand off me and my military escorts. After my freedom, it took my family Doctor and his x-ray team a brief examination to expose all the accumulated causes of my Bama trauma. And yet the people at UMTH, with all their state-of-the-art gadgets, insinuated that my problems were merely environmental. UMTH armed me with ‘the highest pain-killing analgesic’ and returned me to my senders.

Back in prison, I took the drugs and my condition worsened. Dr. Danladi in Bama promptly told me to discontinue them.

So much for UMTH, its classy equipment and its retinue of medical experts.

Twelve

KINGIBE'S MISSIONARY JOURNEY TO BAMA

One day, Bama suddenly brimmed with anticipation. The Minister of Internal Affairs, Ambassador Baba Gana Kingibe, was coming on an official visit. Warders and prison authorities first whispered to me the new development. None of them could say when last any such dignitary visited their off-the-way prison. Such VIP visitors would usually stop at the Maiduguri Prison, the headquarters of the Borno State Prisons Service, and then return to Abuja or Lagos. Kingibe was a homeboy from Borno State and he had volunteered to visit the remote Bama Prison.

In a rare occasion in the life of a prison, the authorities were willing to ask a favour of a prisoner. All the officers knew he was very close to me as we had been colleagues in SDP. The Deputy Comptroller came to me, armed with a long list of needs. He begged me to help lobby for desperately needed facilities in the prison.

I simply replied him: "I am in chains. I cannot lobby for you. When I leave prison and you want anything, I can help anybody. I want to help, but here I'm in chains. I cannot help now."

Even then, I could not be indifference to Kingibe's impending visit. The last time we met, Kingibe had been trying to get me to stop the NUPENG oil workers' strike, and I had refused. After Kingibe became Minister in that turbulent period, we became distanced from each other. We both lost contact. Initially joining

the Abacha government as Minister for External Affairs, he later got posted to the Ministry of Internal Affairs which directly controlled the prisons. How would we face each other now—former associates now on opposite sides; I the jailed; he, my jailor?

Finally, the D-Day arrived. That was one of my saddest days in that prison. Ambassador Kingibe entered the prison with an entourage in the late afternoon of 23rd June, 1995. The prison warders, turned out in unusually well-starched uniforms and shining leather-ware, mounted a short guard-of-honour for the august visitor.

As usual, I was sitting under the tree in the prison yard when Kingibe saw me. He began to rush towards my direction but Protocol men quickly checked him. I was a prisoner, and the Honourable Minister could not just come and meet a common prisoner, so he stopped. He turned his back to me and commenced a guided tour of the prison and he refrained from looking my way throughout his tour.

Soon after the Minister finished the inspection, the Comptroller summoned me to his office where there were many people in the block. It wasn't going to be a private *tete-a tete*. The ministerial entourage, Immigration, SSS, police, warders, etc, filled the whole place. Kingibe sat on the seat of the Deputy Comptroller and I sat on the chair opposite him. So we began to speak, recollecting many things, especially our last meeting over the June 12 crisis. But with dozens of government officials breathing over our heads, we could not stay together for more than 10 minutes.

He said I had aged, that I was grey just like most people in the country. I told him he too had grown grey. Somehow I was surprised that he was aged too. Unbelievable. I thought he would find fulfillment being part of government. Instead, Kingibe looked aged. Since we found we had both aged, we laughed.

I said, "Well, that is the way things are."

He reminded me that the last time we met in Lagos was the night he was leaving for Ghana on a visit as the Minister of External Affairs.

Kingibe is one of those I'm usually happy to see. He is a nice man. But the only problem was that Kingibe wanted to eat his cake and have it. He could not make a sacrifice. Even then, I never put Kingibe in the group of sadists like Abacha, a man who launched a witch-hunt and committed untold atrocities against those he tagged "NADECO People." Kingibe did no such thing. Like a Shakespearean hero, his weakness in character led him to commit fatal flaws, and that weakness had its root in ambition. He wanted to lay hold on office, no matter how menial the position. But beyond the facade and the glitter of his office, Kingibe struck me as a very sad person. He was in government, but he had no power. He could not influence anything. General Abacha's powerful cabinet had hijacked Kingibe, used him and dumped him ultimately. Initially, the government found him an important tool when the rage was on. But then they had sucked him dry and dumped him. The encounter left us both emotionally drained.

After Kingibe left, the prison and I resumed our normal routines. Sometime later, I learnt they were building a new special cell for me. That singular gesture speaks volumes about Kingibe's helplessness. Instead of working to release me, he worked to keep me comfortable in prison. He ordered that a special cell be built for me – self-contained with an in-built toilet, a crouch-type WC. The two cells that Kingibe ordered were spacious, self-contained structures. I understood Chief Obasanjo would use one and I the other. Should I not express gratitude for such a gesture by Kingibe?

I had known Kingibe since we worked together in the Constitution Review Committee in 1987. We had later graduated into members of the pioneer National Executive of the Social Democratic Party.

Kingibe knew the tie that bound himself, myself and Abiola. No way could he forget how we sat together, planning to salvage June 12. The three of us were the master-planners for saving June 12 in 1993. Kingibe and I usually drove to MKO's house together in one car, while the other car would trail the car containing both of us. We mostly sit together with MKO to plan our itoney of action, which most times would take us till 2am and beyond.

But for the short time we had to talk, I had planned to tell Kingibe: "You're in that government and both Abiola and I are imprisoned, what are you still doing there?" But there was no room for such recrimination. All I could do was leave Kingibe to God and to his conscience.

Thirteen

FREEDOM

Due to the isolated life lived in Bama, I was glued to books. The closest company I had in Bama was books.

In the course of time, one good Comptroller got transferred to the prison and he allowed warders to bring books for me from the Borno State Library. They brought me all types of books, but I concentrated on historical books and biographies.

I read Kwame Nkrumah's 'My Autobiography' (Panaf-London, 1979) in which he made this unforgettable observation; "It is not the height to which a man climbs that matters, but the depths from whence he came."

Like me, Nkrumah went to jail for his political convictions. In fact, he contested the 1951 election from prison. From there too, he coordinated the election campaign of his party (CPP). On election day, the Prison Superintendent arranged hourly progress reports to him. Kwame Nkrumah became his country's first indigenous Prime Minister. Was I proud to be drinking from the same cup from which he drank? In prison, I also drew strength from the life and incarceration of Herbert Macaulay (1864-1946), of whom Tekena Tamuno wrote (1973):

His two terms of imprisonment (1913 and 1928) would have demoralised ordinary folks. But not him. These prison terms were in fact significant for his career.

Many heroes and heroines of history have had similar experiences. Indeed, what makes them heroes or heroines is that they are able to survive such forced or voluntary removal from the public scene, making use of the time to engage in a critical re-examination of their beliefs, and then to reappear on the stage and re-double their efforts along their various chosen paths of action. This was exactly what Herbert Macaulay did.

Sometimes I read novels when historical books were not available. I cannot but remember how General Sani Abacha expired on the laps of two whores – one imported, the other, local—whenever I call to mind the Novelist, Leon Uris, who coined this memorable line in his work. The Hajj:

“Prostitution has always been the faithless companion of soldiers.”

And when they could no more bring me such creative books, I started reading encyclopedia. I read the whole volumes of the new Encyclopaedia by Casting, Volume 1 to Volume 25, two times. I read all of Wagners Encyclopaedia, cover to cover. Space Science, Sports, History, Medicine, Microbiology, Pharmacy, Geography, Biographies of great men, etc. You find everything there in the encyclopaedia and I read them all .

What else would you be doing where you are locked up for four years, with the whole idle time on your hand. Getting acquainted with the enclopaedia will have you thoroughly educated with your confidence soaring high.

I read the Koran. I consumed the Bible from cover to cover. I read the Handbook of the Bible, which is even bigger than the Bible. A white Missionary from Gwoza sent it to me through functionaries of the Christian Association of Nigeria. When I regained freedom, I went in search of that volume in the US, and although I did not get an exact replica, today my Library holds a Handbook of the Bible. It is a fantastic book.

I read Ahmed Deedat, one Muslim fundamentalist from South Africa who is very antagonistic of Christianity and writes terrible things to the extent of naming several so-called girlfriends of Jesus Christ. Such authors and books helped me sustain sanity in my lonely state.

However, things changed when on October 17, 1996, I had a neighbour who took up tenancy in the second half of the new cell. He became my first cell mate, in the new cell, built specially for me by Kingibe.

Initially when he was brought into the other cell, he aroused my suspicion. However, after careful questioning and prodding, I came to realise that we were in the same kettle and he was completely helpless and harmless.

“What is your offence?” I asked one day.

He narrated his story. These were the days when General Abacha took up arms against failed banks through the instrumentality of the Failed Banks and Miscellaneous Offences Tribunal. Dr. Emmanuel Adegbeyeni did not operate a failed bank. He worked as a Director of Maritime Services in the Federal Ministry of Transport, which was the supervising ministry of a failed federal shipping agency, the Nigerian National Shipping Line (NNSL). NNSL went into liquidation with some of its ships disposed of in a suspicious manner.

The totalitarian regime frowned at the manner the company had gone under and grabbed Adegbeyeni, being a senior officer in the department, refused him any trial and simply dispatched him to Bama. He told me that he had spent seven months in transit at Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI), Apapa, Lagos.

When he finished I fired him a query: “Look, my friend, tell me the truth, you people ate Nigeria’s money. You people always eat money when we put you in a position of trust.”

“Frank, look you must be very careful,” he said. “I know everything about you and the struggle and that is how some people say Abiola gave you a lot of money. Now you too are accusing me.”

I replied, “You can say whatever you like. June 12 is my struggle and NUPENG is my union. But you are a civil servant who should be in your air-conditioned office now, what brought you here? You must have committed some offence.”

“But you can see they did not charge me for any offence,” he said. “I was at the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI). Look, they tortured me like an animal. Even this Bama is better than that DMI place.”

“You are lucky they built this place,” I said. “General Obasanjo was to stay in that your cell. You just came from that place to ‘enjoy’ this place. Do you know where I was staying before? Now you have conveniences, you have a good cell.”

“DMI was a dungeon; I stayed there for about six months.” He replied

As had been my case when I first came to Bama, Adegbeyeni’s family was prevented from visiting him for four months, but he was lucky to meet me on ground as we shared my provisions together. I was happy to have him.

With his arrival, I had a companion and we would talk all day and pray together. For when this problem came knocking on his life, Adegbeyeni quickly sought refuge in Jesus Christ and became born-again. Prison life brought him even closer to God. Everyday he prayed. For him, every minute was prayer. And he took to inviting me. But at a stage I could not stomach his open display of what I considered an emergency spiritual revival.

“Prof, stop it,” I told him. “Anytime you want to pray, you can do it alone. I can only pray in the morning and when going to bed at night. When you are in prison, you pray without season, but when you get out now you won’t be praying like this anymore.”

He proved intellectually stimulating. We argued, disagreed, bantered and debated. But he was lucky to meet me on ground and we started cooking and sharing everything together. Soon he regained his shine and his bounce. Later, he began telling me of having dreams at night. And what dreams would a prisoner dream of if not of freedom?

Sometimes he would say he dreamt of being released before the end of the month. But I was used to such dreams of optimism. In fact, when that November came, one of “Prophet” Adegbeyeni’s earliest predictions was: “We will not spend Christmas in Bama.”

At the end of the day, we both spent two Christmas together in jail.

Before joining the Ministry, Dr. Emmanuel Ola Adegbeyeni was an academician, holding a Doctorate (Ph.D.) in Mathematics and Computer Science. In highbrow Allen Avenue, Ikeja, Lagos, he owns property with a street named after him. I consider Mathematicians a little eccentric and I used to tell him, “You Mathematicians, you argue a lot.” However, together we discussed and analysed things — two mature adults with nothing better to do. He told me he used to lecture at the University of Lagos, had as contemporaries people like Dr. Enoch Adeboye (General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God) and Dr. Kumuyi of Deeper Life Christian Ministries.

I could remember one day he said, “Wow, I can’t believe I am actually enjoying my stay in prison. Men, I came from hell. DMI was hell.”

I had always been a good prisoner. When it got to my lock-up time, I went in myself, never once argued with a warder. Lock-up time was supposed to be 6pm, but it was elastic. During excruciating heat periods, they allowed me to stay outside till 8 or 9pm, strictly according to Dr. Danladi, my Doctor’s recommendation, — God bless him— who told the prison authorities that the heat must be allowed to dissipate before I retreated for the night. However, whenever a new Head of Prison assumed duties, he would scrap this privilege,

and then I would have to take the battle to Dr. Danladi to issue a fresh recommendation once more.

Unfortunately, Adegbeyeni came in the regime of one rabidly wicked Assistant Comptroller, Mr. Bad Biu. Biu restricted my 8pm lock-up time to 6pm again, even when the cells were as hot as a baking oven going at full blast.

One day as 6pm approached, Adegbeyeni anticipated lockup with an angry and determined scowl on his face.

He whispered to me, "I won't go in. Today, I am staying outside till 8pm." I replied, "Please, here, we have to obey rules and regulations."

"Yes, but you have to be stubborn sometimes."

"Adegbeyeni, come. Don't let this people disgrace us. You are an old man, please, don't let this people disgrace us."

After a long moment of silence, he finally said, "It's because of you I will comply, if not, I would have stayed outside here. It is 8pm they told us we would be locked in, who gave this man the right to change the time?"

Grudgingly, he went into his cell. Usually, our retreat into our separate cells signified the end of our interaction for the day. No way could we communicate till the following morning when our cells were opened again. That trend we kept for eight months. It was the season of oppression under Mr. Bad Biu, who also denied visiting rights to Adegbeyeni's wife and relations.

But then, a new Prison head came and used his discretion to allow Adegbeyeni's wife to visit Bama and to supply his needs. Not bothering to ask permission of the detaining authorities, this kind-hearted prison chief unilaterally granted Adegbeyeni and me, all the rights of prisoners. That was the period I had a soul mate. We chatted, ate and strolled round the prison together. My life changed. You see, there is a difference when political prisoners are kept together. When they are isolated or held incommunicado, an hour looked like one month. It was like killing a man installmentally.

Adegbeyeni benefited from the papers smuggled to me through the back-door. He would be reading one and I would read another after which we exchanged copies. We read voraciously, consuming everything, including adverts. Newspapers were not part of this reading diet. Their tabloid size did not fit the discretion necessary for our secret reading, for if warders saw a prisoner reading, they punished him; most likely in solitary confinement. You could not tuck newspapers away from warders, but magazines could fit into the encyclopedia and the Bible usually allowed prisoners.

Suddenly, one day in May 1998, they summoned Adegbeyeni. “Pack, you are moving,” warders told him. We burst into jubilation. The attitude of prison is, once you find yourself there, you have hit rock bottom and nothing else could be worse. If any change must take place, it had to be for the better.

Thus, when news of Adegbeyeni’s “release” from Bama went round, the whole prison went agog with jubilation, everyone palpably glad that Adegbeyeni was walking into freedom. He quickly made some parting arrangements in my favour, issuing an authorisation note to the authorities that said:

*Balance of my money, ₦20, 000 to be given to Frank
Kokori on my discharge 06/05/98.*

—Dr. E. O. Adegbeyeni.

I sent him to deliver messages to my family and some associates. We embraced and enviously watched by the jubilant prisoners, Adegbeyeni waved us good-bye and walked out of the prison gates.

Two days later, the warders decided to tell me the rest of Adegbeyeni’s story, of which we had been unaware.

According to them, as soon as Adegbeyeni stepped outside the prison wall, he received a rude shock. Unknown to him, and the rest of us, a vehicle was waiting for him outside, A Black Maria. Adegbeyeni went from the cell and straight into that Black Maria. In fact, I was released the following month —far ahead of Adegbeyeni.

He later told me how things went with him that Black Day in May after my release.

Outside the prison, he had been immediately manacled. With the handcuffs eating into Adegbeyeni's flesh all the way, the Black Maria took him through dusty, rough roads and heat all the way to Lagos, a journey of about 1,500 kilometres, and was deposited at Ikoyi Prison.

"I would have died," he later told me, worse still, he was still never charged for or convicted of any offence. I felt very bad. I had hoped that on being released, he would be able to tell the world about the harsh and inhuman conditions of my incarceration. But more than that, I was angry over his punctured hope. On my release, I went to see him at Ikoyi Prison. Adegbeyeni was finally released in March 1999 and in 2004, finally cleared of all charges, reinstated to the Ministry of Transport and paid his arrears of salaries and allowances.

All the media in Nigeria reported my release on the 16th June, 1998, eight days after Abacha's death. However, I think I should best capture it here by reproducing the report appearing in an ICEM publication on the Internet, with the heading: "Crowds Greet Kokori in Lagos. Dabibi Recuperating With Family:"—

Nigerian oil workers' leader, Frank Kokori, arrived back in Lagos yesterday to a noisy welcome from crowds of supporters and the media. He immediately called for an overhaul of Nigerian politics and of the Nigerian unions.

Kokori, who is the General Secretary of the Nigerian Oil and Gas Workers Union, NUPENG, had been detained without trial by the regime of General Abacha, since 1994. In that year, a strike by Nigerian oil workers and others was put down by the military regime and a wave of repression against the oil unions and their leaders was unleashed.

Milton Dabibi, General Secretary of Nigerian Oil and Gas Workers' Union, PENGASSAN, was released from prison on Monday night. He had been held without trial since January 1996. He is now resting with his family at an undisclosed location and is expected in Port Harcourt tomorrow. Sources close to Dabibi said that he would be needing medical care. His conditions of detention are understood to have been particularly harsh.

Both unions are affiliated to the 20-million-strong International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions, which led a sustained worldwide campaign for Dabibi's and Kokori's release. When Abacha died last week, the ICEM, its affiliates and other union internationals immediately asked his successor as Head of State, Major-General Abdulsalam Abubakar, to order Dabibi's and Kokori's release. They are among the first nine detainees to be freed. About a hundred political prisoners are still being held in Nigerian jails.

Observers say Kokori looked and sounded "frail" on his arrival at Lagos airport yesterday. He subsequently told union officers that he is "OK", but they noted that the conditions in which he was detained have "taken a toll on him."

But there was certainly nothing frail about Kokori's speech to the crowds at the airport.

Thanking all those who supported him during his detention, Kokori roundly condemned the Abacha regime and said that he had never really expected to be freed while Abacha remained in power. In fact, "I never wanted to be released under General Abacha, despite the pains I went through in prison."

Turning to the military's annulment of the 1993 presidential elections in Nigeria, Kokori called on Major-General Abubakar to "redress the injustice that was done." The presumed winner of the elections, Moshood Abiola, is among those still being detained without trial.

But some of Kokori's strongest remarks yesterday were directed at the Nigerian trade unions— and more particularly the national union federation, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC).

"What has become of organised Labour movement that we left behind?" Kokori asked his cheering supporters. The NLC had betrayed the 1994 strike, he insisted. At the peak of the 1994 crisis, Kokori recalled, he had spoken to the NLC's leader at that time, Pascal Bafyau: I said, 'let us be on the right side of history.' Bafyau replied. I don't care what side of history I'm on.' "Not long afterwards, Kokori was arrested by the State Security.

SOURCE: *Internet Site of ICEM, 18 June 1998.*

Our freedom provoked joy and hope throughout the civil movement. But I particularly cherish one reaction, which I however did not myself witness. Sola Adeyeye, a Professor of Biology, in whose house my son, Frank (Jnr.), initially stayed in the US, said that they had a dinner date in the US with Professor Wole Soyinka at an Indian restaurant and there they gave Professor Soyinka the news that I and others had regained our freedom in Nigeria. The Nobel Laureate jumped off his seat and began to dance at the restaurant, publicly.

Fourteen

PRISON PEN AND POEMS

*Prison, revolutionaries from the early Bolsheviks
onwards have discovered, provides the best schools.*

Author, unknown

My Three Prison Heads

Throughout my incarceration spanning four years, Bama passed through three prison heads. They dealt with me in varying ways that left a lasting impression on me. In handling me, each showed a character and devotion to duty, remarkably different from his other two colleagues.

Employing pseudonyms for each officer, I have here attempted a character sketch of each of the three.

Timid “Musa”

A Deputy Comptroller I will call Musa, headed Bama Prison when I arrived there. At our first contact, he told me that he had known me for long, as he had been a state NLC leader. According to him, whenever he attended Congress meetings in Lagos he usually saw me on the high table with other NLC leaders. One would have thought that I would be most privileged under his regime.

But Musa demonstrated such cowardice as should not be found in a human being, least of all a so-called Labour activist. Simply put, he was spineless. He feared even his own shadow. All the time, he would say SSS agents were watching and so ‘timid Musa’ neither lifted a finger to help me nor did he allow me basic liberties.

“Biu” the bad

The second man was draconian; a real wicked soul. An Assistant Comptroller, Biu was one of those Northern Christians who converted to Islam. Such people had always proved to be more Catholic than the Pope. He came from Biu, a minority tribe in Borno State, but unlike most Biu people I had known, Assistant Comptroller Biu proved to be a self-bred specie, devilishly enamoured with wickedness. Assistant Comptroller Abubakar “Biu” spent one year in Bama Prison. It was the worst of my four years in the place. His dragnet closed around me so tightly that I never as much as saw one newspaper, apart from shortening the time I was allowed to stay outside the cell.

From Bama, Biu transferred to Yola Prison, where Obasanjo served time over his alleged knowledge of the phantom coup leveled against him and his former deputy, General Musa Yar’Adua. There, Assistant Comptroller Abubakar “Biu” gave Obasanjo hell. He would always deride Obasanjo, saying, “I dealt with Kokori and I will deal with you too. So there is nothing you can do.”

In fact, when Obasanjo first invited me in 1998 to his Ota farm upon our release from prison, he made Assistant Comptroller Abubakar “Biu” the butt of our private jokes. And it continued even after Obasanjo became President. Obasanjo would ask: “What of our friend, Mr. Abubakar “Biu”?”

“He is fine,” I would say. “That man!” he would exclaim, and we would break into a long bout of laughter.

The saintly “Mallam Sanni”

The last prison head that served in Bama was a remarkably good fellow who used a lot of initiative. He made me feel at home in prison and gave me no stress whatsoever. Merely a Chief Superintendent, Mallam Sanni would at quiet moments tell me that his immediate predecessor, Assistant Comptroller Abubakar “Biu” had overly overstepped the bounds of duty, religion and decency in the treatment meted out to us. A true Muslim should not behave the way Abubakar “Biu” behaved, Mallam Sanni would tell me.

1994

I was sitting on my mat under the tree as usual when suddenly a stone from nowhere hit me close to my eyelid. But for providence, it would have smashed my glasses and my eyes. What luck! The warders on the spot who responded to my scream rushed to the Emirs palace, where they suspected the shot came from. But they came back without apprehending any culprit. I thanked God and nursed my injury.

Letter from my younger brother and sister

Warri,

Delta State.

November 25, 1994

Dear Papa Franco,

It gives us great pleasure and deepest relief to hear from you and that you are doing great. In this insane fractured times of almost unbearable anxiety which your detention has caused us, we can only seek succour in God’s promise. Our only consolation is that history is replete with the names of great men who were movers and

shakers of their time; Winston Churchill Vladimir Lenin, Marshal Tito, the great Mahatma Gandhi, and our own Nelson Mandela. The only common factor between these people is that they were all imprisoned because they fought selflessly in the pursuit of freedom and justice.

We hope that one day, history will recall this unjust incarceration of yours and make it one of your finest hours. It is our dearest wish that you will be released before Christmas. And we will sit under a giant Christmas tree to sing praises to the Lord.

We will laugh again.

May God give you the strength that comes from within to overcome this ordeal.

Best wishes

Joseph and Eguono

Letter from My First Child

Surulere,

Lagos.

December 29, 1994

Dear Daddy,

I pray that by the time you are reading this letter, you will be on your way home because I am quite positive that you and the others will be released on the 1st of next year. Myself and everybody were so happy to hear from you because sister (my two eldest children fondly call their mother “sister”) has been trying hard to get through on phone. My self and sister are planning to see you immediately after the New Year, that is, if you are not released. But I am sure you will be, because the last time I saw you in my dream, that was the only time you did not go back. Do you know that the day you

were arrested, that same minute you were with the security people, a voice told me in my dream that he can't find you and I woke up and prayed. I wasn't surprised when I was told in the morning that you had been arrested. I don't know how it happens, but somehow I sense when you are sick and when you are okay. If you are sick I see it in my dream and when you are okay I will also see you telling me that you are okay.

Everything is okay as expected in your absence. Onome is spending her holiday with Auntie Rose, complaining that work is too much.

Do you know that you are so popular now that even a Molue bus driver wrote "KOKORI the Great" at the back of his bus?

We shall see hopefully on the 2nd by the grace of God. Take care, stay blessed, eat well, sleep well and pray always. God Bless.

Love,

Cordelia

Letter to My Family

Bama Prisons,

Borno State.

November 25, 1995

My Dearest Wife and Kids,

This is wishing you all a very Merry Xmas and a happy and prosperous New Year in advance. If it is the wish of God, I shall join the entire family for a Happy Christmas celebration this year. But everything is in the hands of God. If He rules otherwise, so let it be. I prepared a letter for you before your last visit to Bama. I am sure you must have received it by now through our man. He assured me that he had already sent it by post.

Now, how is Cordi? And the little Aghogho boy, hope they are all doing well. Indeed I am hungry to see and hold my first grandchild. What a gift! Cordi, big congrats to you.

The only news gladdening my heart for the moment is the international community's clamp-down on Nigeria. At least, the civilised world is now seeing through the evil of our present "Masters". Nigerians of every faith are praying night and day. Surely, God will not forsake them. He is a hearing and all-knowing God.

Books! Books!! Books!!! I continue to cry. Come with a bag of novels during your next visit. Collect from Willie or other sources; also, old international magazines. Without these books, I die of boredom.

My very warm greetings to all who think good of us. Bye and God bless you all.

Thanks

Big Daddy

P.S.

Letter from me to my family

Bama Prisons,

Borno State.

December 12, 1995

My Dearest Wife and Kids

The first letter is dated since 25/11/95. I was hoping then to send it with a Christmas greeting card. But up till now they could not buy me a card in Bama. In fact, when they finally got me one, it turns out to be a sympathy card. Well, well, well, no problem, life goes on.

I hear the international community is still up in arms against this evil regime. My only advice for now is that we should all bear any inconvenience. There is surely a glorious dawn at the corner.

Here I am trying to survive, and I will surely survive. And I hope you will all survive for a glorious happy re-union very soon.

Again, my very warm greetings to all who think good of us.

God Bless.

Big Daddy

December 25, 1995

My second Christmas was celebrated quietly with a church service in the morning. I preached the sermon. I was in fairly good health and I enjoyed my Christmas meal. Many inmates and warders alike wished me a Merry Christmas, praying that I would be released quickly to join my family.

*We shall overcome
We shall overcome some day
Deep in my mind
I do believe - that
We shall overcome some day*

January 29, 1996

I felt very sick. In fact my BP rose abnormally. My doctor placed me on a new drug, which overreacted. My BP came down immediately. But the after-effect of the drug was harsh on me for days; vomiting and total weakness. I didn't get my bearings until after five days.

February 6, 1996

My Boy, Steven, was transferred back to Gwoza Prisons with few minutes notice. He had been what is called in prison jargon, “Lodger” at Bama. I indeed felt his departure. But I wished him God’s guidance.

A boy, Ali (Not real name)

He was a student when he was convinced to go into crime by a man he regularly met at a cinema house near his dwelling place. The older man who was an artisan in the Works Ministry was able to convince him that he would bid poverty farewell if he joined his gang. A gang of two was formed —the other is an AWOL soldier, a deserter.

With the confidence of charms in their possession and a pistol that the godfather supplied, they started on their trade. Many government establishments became their targets. The godfather did the surveillance and they would move in. The larceny continued uninterrupted. And the filthy lucre was cushioning their lifestyle. The bubble was to burst when the godfather was one day confronted in the office to produce one piece of equipment under his care (the big cutter of locks). He had left it with his boys. He finally confessed. The boys were rounded up, prosecuted and jailed only a year each. The godfather got two and half years with the option of a ₦2,000 fine. He paid his fine and got out. My boy was able to get his light sentence because his neighbours were able to vouch for his previous good conduct in the area and the Alkali was an area man. This fellow rated as one of my best boys.

He had vowed never to go back to the trade. He had reposed much confidence in the charm that he inherited from his father, but it failed him. Some of their loot often comprised air conditioners, fans, furniture, etc., from government offices. They usually returned

from their operations loaded. However, grief greeted him later in prison and this largely contributed to his volte face from crime. This came from his losing his father while in jail. Nemesis, you will say.

April 27-28, 1996

My diabetes erupted for the first time since 1990: after being totally dormant for 15 months. It was put under control after 2 days.

August 17, 1996

The following books were today withheld by the prison boss, who claimed they were political!

1. *Nkrumah the Man —A Friend's Testimony* by Genoveva Kanu (Delta, 1982)
2. *Travails du West Africa* by Mary Kingsley (Virago Press, 1982)
3. *Just Before Dawn* by Kole Omotoso (Spectrum Books, 1988)
4. *Napoleon* by Vincent Cronin (Penguin, 1983)
5. *World View* 1984
6. *An Economic and Geopolitical Book* (Pluto Press).

October 9, 1996

Letter to My Family

Bama Prisons

My Dear Wife and Kids,

I am glad that you all arrived home safely from your last visit to Bama. I hope everybody is well for now. I am always worried about your well-being. In fact, I almost died of worries when your last visit was unusually delayed, more so after the very sad news of Hajia Kudirat's death. A great woman —what a waste!

The government has refused up till now to take me to the hospital to receive medical treatment for my spinal problem. The case is deteriorating everyday. The pains through my spine to my head are killing me. I have complained many times to no avail. Even my doctor from the General Hospital here has also complained to no avail since his recommendation in February 1996 that I should be taken to the University Hospital at Maiduguri. Your pressure should also be directed towards this and let the world see the barbarism of this regime.

For now I have continued to resign my fate to God. What else can I do?

Luckily, for now, my diabetes has declined again so I now do without anti-diabetic drugs and am strictly controlling it with dieting alone for now. This spinal problem is my major problem for now.

Let me assure all of you to have no fear. This government knows that I have committed no crime which they can convict me on. The NUPENG strike is wholly official, i.e. a strike ordered by the National Executive Council of a union. They toyed with the idea of charging me on the **Petroleum Anti-Sabotage Decree, But they know they will fail woefully there. They can only take me to court on Labour related offence and I have committed none. The worst they can do now is to murder me, but to condemn me through the process of any civilised law, they will surely fail.

During your next visit endeavour to bring the following:

1. A small bed sheet
2. Some vitamin drugs
3. Anti-hypertensive drugs
4. Urine sugar test stripes to monitor my urine and the other things you know.

Please remember novels, novels alone. The new man here has refused to hand over the last books to me, claiming they are political books. When next you are coming, iron this out with the Comptroller at Maiduguri because this fellow here is very ignorant. When bringing magazines let them be issues dating back from 1991 i.e. before I was locked up in prison. Please, don't fail to bring these big novels. Tell the children to go out and borrow. Without these books, I am bored to death. You can't imagine it. I heard that the Comptroller may be visiting Bama. I hope to lay my problems before him. Don't fail to visit this November.

I rarely hear any outside news these days. The only thing I hear is that the international community is pressurizing this deaf government. But Nigerians are dormant.

I greet all of you and God bless you all.

Big Daddy

October 21, 1996

A shocker! Lockup time suddenly changed from 10pm to 6pm. I was downcast. But both of us decided to take our problems to God for we were totally helpless. Then within 24 hours, the decision was reversed to almost normal.

October 26, 1996

Bungled lockup time caused by breakdown in communication again. This time we were again ordered to go in to be locked up at 6pm. We refused and stood on our right. Our right was finally upheld.

Letter to My Family

Bama Prisons

October 31, 1996

My Dearest Wife and Kids,

This letter is an addendum to the first which I hope shall all be received together. My health problem has been very bad. The spinal cord problem gives me terrible pains and discomfort everyday. As a result, my BP is permanently high. Yet, they have refused to take me to see a specialist in any big hospital.

Below is a draft of a letter I want you to address to the Head of State and make available to some reliable national and international media.

It goes as follows:

The Head of State &
The Commander in Chief of the
Federal Republic of Nigeria,
Aso Rock-Abuja

CHIEF FRANK KOKORI'S DETERIORATING HEALTH

Dear Sir,

I am sadly constrained to inform your government urgently about the deteriorating health of my husband, Chief Frank Ovie Kokori, General Secretary, National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG). His condition is worsening by each passing day.

During my last two visits to him at the Bama Prisons in Borno State, he complained to me in severe pains, that the only government doctor allowed to see him in the prison has since February 1996

recommended him for orthopaedic specialist treatment at the University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital for his deteriorating spinal cord ailment. This same doctor has also written more than three reminders on this matter. Yet the prison authorities, acting under the aegis of the State Security Services (SSS), have refused to act.

Let us accept that my husband had been unjustly detained since August 1994 without any form of trial purely on his union's belief to see democracy and justice thrive in this country. Is this sufficient reason to prevent him from receiving medical treatment when he is seriously ill and thereby condemn him to death by installments?

We should all search our conscience. In the name of God, I am fervently appealing to you by this letter to order his release now or at the least send him for specialist medical treatment before it is too late.

I am also forced to make copies of this letter public to arouse the conscience of the country and the civilised world.

Thanks for your anticipated cooperation.

Yours Obediently,

Mrs. E.O. Kokori

November 4-5, 1996: The Dream

As I was sitting outside my cell in the morning as usual, Okoi, the boy from Cross River State walked up and greeted me. He then narrated a dream which he had the previous night. According to him, “We were all at the Christian fellowship worship when a Warder came in with a letter for me, announcing my release. There was big jubilation, and the congregation then escorted me to the gate where I took my exit.”

Ironically, that same night, I had a similar dream. I was out as a free man. Now my release was the hottest news of the day and The Guardian newspaper became the only paper with the full coverage. As a result, the paper was in top demand and was hoarded by vendors. I called a vendor to sell me a copy but the vendor was only interested in selling other papers to me. I insisted on The Guardian and snatched the only remaining copy. But the vendor would not allow this as, according to him, the copy was reserved for a special customer, until I introduced myself thus: “I am the freed Kokori.” My vendor friend was shocked and smiled at me. Then I woke up to see myself still in my prison cell.

*Amen, Amen, we bind the devil
We loose God's Spirit in this place
We speak in tongues Satan is confused
Deliverance is followed, Amen.*

*I am delivered, praise the Lord
I am delivered by His words
Once I was bound by the chains of Satan
I am delivered, praise the Lord.*

November 6, 1996

A new officer (S.P.) takes over Bama Prisons.

November 17, 1996

Embargo on newspapers was partially lifted—yet to be seen. Difficult to believe; after 27 months. My international magazines (1995 editions) seized since 17/08/96 were also returned. What a good day.

December 12, 1996

My boy Wada behaved unusually, withdrew service unilaterally and returned back to apologise within two hours.

The Shua Boy

There is this Shua boy who is my manicure expert. He had earlier served six months term and was discharged, only to return on another three years term for gun-running. He confessed to me that his greatest pain was his new bride of three and half months. He said his mother once innocently brought the girl (who is a cousin and barely 15 years) on a visit to see him in the prison. He said he was very upset with that visit and warned his mother not to bring the girl again. When I taunted him that the girl may be seduced away from him before his discharge, he replied with optimism that the girl would wait loyally for him. His mother, sisters and brothers were there to protect his interest and shield the girl away from “wolves.”

December 21-22, 1996: My Mother (A Dream)

Today, I saw my mother in a dream (I usually see her in my dreams in my time in jail, always encouraging me). This time, I met her in her market shed, just like in the days of my childhood, when she would sit behind her old sewing machine at the market. I had just put up a magnificent performance at the City Hall with my team in a quiz contest. I was awarded honours. Now, when I met her in the market she commented that my achievement had preceded me and that everybody was already talking about my outstanding performance. She spoke of how happy and how proud of me she was. My mother said she was not surprised because she always knew I “would make it.”

December 25, 1996

My third Christmas in jail. I spent it quietly but in high spirits. Fortunately though, for the first time since 1994, I had a colleague to share my Christmas meal. We had a good meal which we also enjoyed.

January 4, 1997

One of my good boys, Mehmud, got his discharge after serving his two years sentence.

Kokori as Prison ‘VIP’

I am something of a ‘VIP’ here, believe it or not. Warders took an official promotion interview test in which they had a question asking them to say the date of my arrival here at Bama (i.e. 22nd September 1994).

March 25, 1997

This cell has turned into a furnace. Bama temperature could sometimes hit 44 degree Centigrade. Great God, this is unbearable! Give us protection. I shall forever remain grateful.

My immediate reaction to the news of the armed robbery attack on my household in Lagos since 6/3/97. This news only came my way today 25/3/97 at 1pm in the prison. I read it in a publication. However, my BP was calmed by the glorious words of my wife, a woman of courage. In spite of all this, Esther still gives thanks to the Lord that no life was lost in that bone-chilling encounter with the men of the underworld.

“I just thank God nobody was killed. I just pray that God touches the hearts of those young men who attacked us.... Since my husband has been in detention, it has not been easy feeding and paying school fees for my children. I leave everything to God,” she said. “And at this traumatic time, I can only add that the Almighty God must know that the Kokoris have never stopped trusting Him. So God, don’t stop trusting us.”

Justice – the way we do it here!

A poor villager came to Bama Market on the market day. He purchased a chicken. While standing by the roadside to take transport home, he was arrested by the police for idleness. They locked him up at the prison’s Awaiting Trial Section for about six weeks before his wife located him. She arrived with the last ₦400 at home. But this “miserable amount” was inadequate to bail him out.

The Welfare Department of the prison pleaded on his behalf to no avail. The woman returned to the village to beg for more money. This time she came with another ₦300. This amount arrived when the Prosecutor was “stone broke” and was about to travel home. For this officer, this was Manna from above. He spoke to the Alkali

who finally granted the accused bail. And the chicken? It had disappeared from the “custody” of the police from the first day of its owner’s arrest.

March 26, 1997

And I begin to wonder if there is God! And if there is, whether He has forgotten me.

April 11-12-1997

Another night of inferno in the oven cell. That I survived is one of the mysteries of God.

May 17, 1997

The second of my two prison boys —Kehinde — was discharged. He was one of my companions during the past sixteen months. I wished him luck.

May 20, 1997

Oh God! I am at one of my lowest points in prison. This spinal pain is killing me.

May 21, 1997

The Comptroller General of Prisons came on a flying visit. We did not meet this time.

June 22, 1997

This day, we could not continue the day’s fellowship at the prison church because we could not understand each other. The only two who managed to serve as interpreters had been forced to the Army farms.

June 23, 1997: Newswatch Magazine

So if you see Frank Kokori, tell him not to lose hope. He and his men in the oil workers union tried what these Sierra-Leoneans are doing now in 1994. They called their members out on strike in support of their demand that General Sani Abacha should hand over to Abiola as President of the Federal Republic. Their action had a telling effect on the economic and social life of the country. But as you would recall, it crumbled. Blame it on the wind of change.

Dan Agbese

July 3, 1997

My wristwatch disappeared. It got me very worried. My warder was asked about 9pm to make enquiries among some prisoners in a covert manner. I finally saw it in an unusual place. What a relief! ...but is this cell specially built to trap heat to roast the occupant at night?

July 25, 1997

The mysterious ways of God. After I recovered from my numb state, I then asked God, "Why must it happen to me now?" I expected an immediate reply but God would not answer me. Then I realized, "Who am I to question the ways of God?" He is the God who "moves in mysterious ways, His performs wonders."

July 30, 1997

Pains! Pains!! Pains!!! Spinal problem is killing me. From my head through my neck to my toes give me all pains and total discomfort. Yet I can get no relief from the medical side.

August 19, 1997

“Man is born free but he is everywhere in chains.” Three years today, I have been in chains because of my beliefs. But today I remain humbled before God, for He alone knows why I have remained in this state.

Letter to My Family

Bama Prisons

Borno State

August 26, 1997

My Dearest Wife and Kids,

I am aware that the family is currently passing through very difficult times, but we should continue to entrust our hope in God. For in His divine ways He shall put us out of this into greater glory.

I am particularly grateful to God that no life was lost in the last terrible incident.

Now, how is everybody? I have been very worried for lack of any visit from home, especially after the last incident.

By all means, you should endeavour to visit before the end of September. My funds are running out fast.

My health problems still remain unattended to. The prison authorities have made series of representations to the higher authorities at Abuja, but it seems they won't just budge. In fact, I can't understand because my spinal problem is very serious and everybody here, including the local doctor, attests to it. But he says he is helpless to do anything since it is not his specialty.

When you are coming, come along with those items (including drugs) which I listed for you during your last visit.

I know everybody is hoping that I will soon be released, but we still have to make contingency plans, just in case things don't go the way we expect.

I need a fresh towel (not white) and a bed sheet.

I continue to pray everyday for God to grant us a happy family reunion soonest.

I know God is alive, but I cannot comprehend His ways.

Now my greetings to everybody, first, Ess-Woman, Cordi, Franko, Efe, Aghoghor and Onome — the Thatcher Girl, the only one I haven't seen since my Odyssey. But you may not bother to bring her along. I prefer to meet her during the family re-union very soon.

Bye for now and God bless all of you.

Much, much love.

Big Daddy

PS.

If there is necessity to reply, the address is:

C/o Superintendent of Prisons

Bama Prisons

Bama, Borno State.

August 27, 1997

This has been my most frightful dream so far since my days in prison. It started when one of my sisters-in-law decided to escort me out to search for my wife who had gone out for a family meeting. Somehow as we were leaving, a small girl of about eight years old, who is a younger sister of my wife, decided to tag along with us. At this stage she was looking innocent and I had no objection to her accompanying us. As the search continued, this little girl started becoming an embarrassment to us because of her unorthodox behaviour. She became sullen, interfering in adult conversation in an unbridled fashion.

At a stage we were forced to scold her, I even spanked her a little. She ceased being naughty for sometime. Then she resumed again. Meanwhile, our search continued. Then, at a stage she got out of control. When I started scolding her again, she drew out a long and sharp kitchen knife and threatened us. With this, I decided to descend on her and bring her to her senses. I picked up a broken chair around the corner to attack her in order to disarm her. She was behaving now like an adult. After I successfully disarmed her, she suddenly fell limp and I started dragging her along. After some distance she looked as if she had already died. I became scared. When we finally met my wife, she became worried herself when she heard the story.

We now decided to return to narrate the incident to the family. During this period I was continuously lamenting, silently to myself, saying, "Why can't this be a dream?" On our way we met an elder brother of my wife whom we knew as influential in their family, we decided to call him and put him in the picture to enable him understand the true picture and in turn put the true story before the family to diffuse the seriousness of the problem. Just before we got to him, he and his friends moved into a club house. We tried to

follow him in. There was a problem. There was a sort of blockade that the club house will not admit more people as it was already filled up. After much effort, we were able to go in. Again the man we were looking for was elusive. He had just gone out. I had to struggle to get out to locate him again. Finally my wife and sister joined us. The search continued. My worrying continued, and I continually repeated, “Why can’t this be a dream? How can I have a dead child on my hands?”

Now after much searching, we were finally told that the man we were searching for was already at the family house and that everybody was waiting for us as the matter was already known to them. At a stage, I had problems locating the family house, a place I knew so well (Confusion galore). Now the family house was just some few yards away. I was preparing myself to present my case, but wondering how they would take it. Suddenly I woke up. It was all a dream. I was greatly relieved. What a dream!

September 10, 1997

Today is a great day. Even in prison, it became one of my happiest days in life. Thanks to my wife’s visit after an unusual six months period. To add to my tension during this period was the armed robbery attack on my household. Seeing my wife in company of one of my relations (“Lucky Boy”), I was overjoyed. Then to add to my joy was the plenty good news from home. Top of which was my family’s relocation to my personal house, which all along had been “commandeered” by a gang of ungrateful old tenants. I thanked God immensely for I know He is alive.

September 14, 1997: Religious Tolerance

That is how it should be. This day I looked towards the prison mosque and saw one prisoner reading a Christian tract, titled “Now for Grace,” distributed by one of these Christian evangelists from Owerri. I turned and looked at him again. He stared right back at me and continued his reading, fairly audibly. There were about three other prisoners resting with him in the mosque then.

September 16, 1997: State Comptroller’s Visit to the Prison.

It is his second visit this year and I spoke my mind to him on the neglect of my health by the government. I emphasised the consequences of having another “Saro Wiwa” in their hands. He promised again to do his best to strongly put the matter up again to the authorities. But this my spinal problem is deteriorating everyday.

SOS Letter to My Physician

Bama Prisons

September 17, 1997:

The Principal Medical Officer

(Dr. Danladi)

Bama General Hospital,

Bama, Borno State.

My Dear Dr. Danladi,

How is the family and life generally? As you know, this my spinal cord problem is deteriorating everyday. I am in real pains every hour of the day. I am dying installmentally. When the State Comptroller of Prisons visited yesterday, the matter of my poor health was the principal topic of discussion. He now strongly advised that you

should write a strong official letter to this effect to back the current effort of the prisons to enable me go for specialist treatment at the University Hospital as you have often indicated in your routine visits in my treatment medical logbook. I fervently trust you will hasten action on this to reduce the suffering of a Fellow Compatriot.

The bearer, the Senior Superintendent of Prisons, will brief you further.

My Very Warm Regards
Frank Ovie Kokori (Chief)

September 24, 1997

The prison authorities started taking unusual punitive action against us because of an innocuous incident. Meanwhile, they have not even heard our side of the incident. "Prison justice" maybe.

September 25, 1997

Saturday, my only tribesman I saw till date in Bama Prison became three times lucky with another discharge fine paid.

September 26, 1997

After we met the Superintendent of the yard and told our side of the story, he was flabbergasted. He explained that he was misinformed by some warders who exaggerated the whole matter. Happily, our old rights were restored and the mischievous warders were transferred to new beats.

I read of Caligular, real name Gaius Caesar (12-41 AD), one of the most vicious Roman Emperors. He became a most ruthless tyrant after a severe illness. Historians believe that he probably went insane. He squandered his fortune on public entertainment

and building projects, banished or murdered most of his relatives, enjoyed having people tortured and killed while he dined; made his favourite horse a Consul, declared himself a god and had temples erected and sacrifices offered to himself. In 41 AD in a palace coup, officers of his guard conspired and murdered him. Don't we have a Nigerian parallel?

Letter to My Family

Bama Prisons

November 10, 1997

My Dearest Ess-Woman and My Loving Kids,

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year in advance. Since your last visit, I have remained in very high spirits because of the plenty good news you came with. Even though I am still in pains but I am grateful to God for everything.

You or Franco should deliver Gani's letter personally after photocopying.

I am immensely happy that you have moved to our personal house. Please if by now you have not settled the Genesis lease, do everything to have it settled because there lies your economic security for now. I know if things are difficult, some of my well-wishers will be ready to help.

Your interview in Tell, "I Don Tire for Abacha" is great. I am proud of you and all the children. I am happy that the Kokori Legend lives on.

Greet everybody for me, especially those who are good to you now. God bless you all, for I know He will protect all of us for a happy re-union very soon.

P.S: Delay your visit till February '98, if I am not released before then.

November 10, 1997: Hospital at Last!

At long last I was taken to the University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital for a full medical check-up. The approval came since 3/11/97. I was escorted down by a platoon of well-armed security outfit. I was returned back same day to the yard at about 6pm. My spirit was up again after the checkup. My visit was over-dramatised by Abuja throughout the platoon escort. The hospital management, after an initial insistent, “who will settle the bill?” became good, friendly and performed their duties with a friendly face.

November 12, 1997: My Boys in Prison

The prison allotted to me a new serving boy, Usman Alhaji. So far, I have been served by the following prisoners:

23/09/94	Steven Yohanna
06/02/96	Sani Garuba
13/07/96	Audu Gorji
02/12/96	Warda
13/03/97	Oliver Baza
08/06/97	Abba Zana
12/11/97	Usman Alhaji.

December 7, 1997

Today, I clocked 54 years —my 4th birthday in jail. I spent the day quietly. I was wished Happy Birthday by my colleague, Dr. Adegbeyeni, the only person around who knows the significance of the date to me.

December 11, 1997

I had a dream. After swearing to punish me for my stubbornness, a woman began pursuing me. I went on the run. Both of us were on horseback. The pursuit was long. I crossed from one obstacle

to another. She followed in hot pursuit. When she realised that I was out of reach, she then became deadly. She concocted a lie. She conspired with a group of some “Roman Catholics.”

Incidentally in the dream just like normal life, Catholicism was the dominant denomination with over 75 percent of members. The big plot she told these Catholics was that I had plans to assassinate the “Pope.” What a big lie! With that, the entire Catholic world immediately supported her. And they decided to eliminate me. The method was to be James Bond style. Somebody would get close to me and just rub me with a deadly lotion and I would die.

Then the miracle occurred. Lo, as I was galloping off on my stallion, there emerged the mother of this evil woman with this deadly potion that she started pouring on me. Luckily, she missed me by a fraction. And as I galloped off the potion fell on the next rider who appeared from nowhere. And lo, the rider was the “General” himself. He was consumed to ashes in the presence of so many onlookers.

I woke up immediately from my nightmare. Sweat covered my whole body. When I looked at my time, it was lam. I got up and prayed.

Christmas Morning 1997: A Dream

Somebody around me was pronouncing Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli PM’s name with special emphasis. And another person who appeared to be a senior functionary of the Netanyahu government was promoting the achievements of that government, claiming it had been able to achieve most of its aims, especially the promise to assist Third World countries. Then again there appeared the picture of South Africa where one of her officials spoke of the “miracle” that is now SA. He spoke of the plan to establish and create development programmes that would be the envy of the world, most especially

their plan to bring up her science to the highest world standard emphasising that they have already established the most advanced university for medicine in the country. All this was inside a dream. And then I was transported again to Israel where a tiny Christian fellowship was singing heart-rending Christian songs with much gusto.

Then suddenly I was awake. And lo, the tiny Christian fellowship group in Cell 5 filled the whole yard with their very warm Christian chorus songs —this Christmas morning— very unusual, in fact the first time since my sojourn in this prison. They were singing with such gusto as if possessed by the Holy Spirit. The time was about 5.30 am. I was greatly moved. There I was, touring Israel and South Africa in my dream and then in Bama prison physically just in the space of some few minutes. This was how my fourth Christmas in prison was heralded.

Christmas 1997

We had the usual Christmas service, which was well attended by the few Christian inmates. The service was very lively. And I was in good spirits throughout the day.

Note to the Whole Family

To Aghoghor: I am so happy to hear of your admission at last. Especially to U.I. In fact this your news and that of the house was the greatest news that raised my spirit.

Onome: How are you doing? Good you have completed your secondary education. I know you are very grown up now (Elephant Baby). Hoping to see you very soon.

Ess-Woman: Hope you have heard from Cordi? Franco should be assisting you in running around and playing the Ag. Big Man of the House. Efe, the scientist, I hope he is enjoying his programme at U.I. I wish all of you the best of luck. Once more, I am proud of all of you.

New Year 1998

My 1998 New Year Day was spent quietly. It is my fourth in Bama prison. As usual, we had the morning service in addition to the regular Thursday evening fellowship. I have stopped hoping for my release on New Year Day since 1995.

January 2-8, 1998

The nation held a fast as directed by church leaders in Nigeria. We had a token of observation of the fast in prison.

January 1998, Damala's Case:

This is a Cameroonian who fluently spoke French and Hausa. He served two years in jail and was discharged on 22nd December 1997. But 5th January 1998, he was caught red-handed, stealing a warder's motor-bike from the prison gate. What a case! When he was finally brought in from the Police Station to the yard, he was given a "special treatment" by the warders.

January 13, 1998

The boys in the Islamic Fundamentalist Boys' Case bagged jail sentences of one to three years. The youths wondered why they should be jailed for upholding what the Quran says. "There is no constitution but the Quran" is their credo. Talking to them further, I found out they were barely in their mid-twenties with a basic primary school education, in addition to the Quranic education they gained from their maverick teacher.

January 27, 1998

The Magistrate that came to review the cases of the Awaiting Trial Men (ATM) stopped by to say hello to both of us political detainees. It was the first such visit since my stay in this prison.

“419” scam wrapped around Abiola

One prisoner said he was in jail for committing “419” Advance Fee Fraud. He had spun a yarn successfully about Abiola. When Abacha detained the politician, this trickster went to tell some rich Northerners that one of Abiola’s numerous wives wanted a safe place to keep some of his wealth in return for a juicy reward to whoever harboured the treasure. He was able to convince someone who advanced some cash supposedly to ferry the boxes of money from Lagos to the North. He successfully got away with that crime. But he was eventually arrested for an entirely different fraud perpetrated on another victim.

Nathan Hale

“I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”-Nathan Hale, the American patriot at the gallows September 22, 1776.

ANNIVERSARY POEM

Before the clay god wink not I
And I blink not for terror
Some will come and be canonised
With the wind, others may go
Why not bark and be among.

Down down there the gods are naked
But I blink not for them
Hallowed grounds may be scorched

But the lily may survive
Why not plunge and be counted.
Come next day the gods are gone
But the nightingale is silent
For the nova star will shine again
And the blithe be no more
For this Pentecost will endure.
Frank kokori – Sept. 22, 1995

THE OAU (ANNIVERSARY SOLILOQUY)

What a monumental deceit!
A continental social society?
A continental motor club?
A regional boat club?
Tell me, tell me, Mother Africa.

Frank Kokori

Grandiose Agenda (OAU)

Pompous Semantics
Africa, Africa; this is a façade.

Frank Kokori

Where is the Oil Comrade?
What are the comrades doing?
Where is that star - born one
The enfant terrible oil comrade
Who showed the chief warrior pepper in the early days?

Oh, that one? Who still remembers him?
He was trapped a long lime ago
And is yet to be seen since then
That is unfortunate.

THE WEEK, May 19, 1997

Nigerian Sorrow

Sorrow for our people, gives me greater sorrow
Joy for them gives me greater joy.

Frank Kokori

A Cry to the Almighty

Father God, I have never stopped trusting you
So don't stop trusting me.

Frank Kokori

History and Me

In all my doings, I have always been conscious of the verdict of
history.

Frank Kokori

Fifteen

ESTHER AND THE CHILDREN IN THE STRUGGLE

I have a close-knit family. And because of the way I brought up my children and organised my family, we operated a mini-democracy at home. Luckily, I had my children early. At age 31, I already had four children, all born between 1969 and 1975, while our last child came in 1980. In critical 1993, Cordelia, my eldest, became a graduate.

Their mother had a modest education, just as I had in 1967 when I (as a staff of the Electricity Corporation of Nigeria, ECN) married her. But those days, Nigeria was a good place, and one could get a good job with a secondary school certificate. Esther had concluded modern school and after doing some commercial courses (you know, the usual Typing, Shorthand, Bookkeeping, etc.) quickly secured a job as a Stenographer with British Paints in Lagos.

But with her, I was not selfish. I exposed her to the risks and opportunities inherent in trade unionism. In the late 1970s and 1980s, she traveled the world with me to conferences in places like France, Holland, Britain, Belgium and the United States of America. By the time I secured admission to do my two-year Masters degree at The Hague in 1983, she could only come on short-term visits ,for by then, we already had a large family, and someone had to be around to monitor the home-front.

Other than Nigeria, I have lived longest in The Hague, Netherlands – that was during the two years I spent studying there for my Masters. I’ve traveled to nearly every part of the world. Name any continent in the world, I have been there. But I like The Hague in Holland best, of all cities on earth. Amsterdam is Holland’s business capital. The Hague is the administrative capital, a town that is well disciplined, beautiful and where everything works. Unlike in Geneva, life in The Hague is not too expensive. The Hague comfortably accommodates the average Dutchman and the usual tourist too can easily afford to stay in hotels therein. In those days when I studied there, the average Nigerian tourist (when the Naira was very strong) could arrive The Hague with ₦3,000 and stay there comfortably.

When we talk about Nigeria, I wouldn’t talk about any favourite place apart from where I come from – Warri. No matter what people say about Warri, that is still where I prefer to pitch my tent. I love the place. I call myself a Wafi Boy and Warri will always remain in me.

But our home and office are based in Lagos. In the office as in my home, I operated an “open-door policy.” Esther and the children even have all the codes to locks and boxes in the house. Mine was an enlightened home-front. As I did in the office, I would usually hold meetings at home, using this hour to table before the whole family issues that I needed to make decisions about. And everybody made suggestions. With such an orientation, my children and my wife imbibed the virtues of justice and fair play. They believed that people deserved to be given their rights and they felt anger at injustice.

With such an orientation, my wife easily plunged headlong with me into all the decisions and actions I took with regard to the June 12 struggle. So did all the children. The risk, the ultimatum and the whole issues were all explained to them, hence they all knew

what to do. Our two eldest children - Cordelia and Franco - were fully committed to the struggle. And the Press and the international community duly accorded them their personal recognition. As a result, during my incarceration, they easily got invitations to receive awards on my behalf. Also, that gave Cordelia and Franco the clout to be invited to go and live abroad when Abacha took to wantonly killing his opponents.

Diplomats like Walter Carrington of the United States related with Esther very well. In a September 1997 interview, Ambassador Carrington told *Tell* magazine of his post-Nigerian assignment: I have been offered a fellowship at Harvard... where I will decompress, relax and feel free, lecture and write.

Poor man, he had come to regard Nigeria as a depressing battlefield where against commonsense and despite all efforts, his best Nigerian friend, M.K.O. Abiola, languished in jail, despite being elected President. I never met Walter Carrington until I returned from prison. But he had extended invitations to Esther as a Detainee's wife along with other wives of incarcerated activists like: Mrs. Arit Igiebor (wife of exiled Editor-in-Chief of *TELL* magazine, Nosa Igiebor), Mrs. Chinata Nwite (wife of detained Senator Polycarp Nwite), Mrs. J.A. Ajayi (wife of Col. E.A. Ajayi, one of the military officers imprisoned over the alleged 1995 coup), Mrs. Osifo-Whiskey (wife of detained *TELL* magazine's Managing Editor), Mrs. Bunmi Ajibade (wife of Kunle Ajibade, imprisoned Editor of *The News*) and Miss Nike Ransome-Kuti (daughter of jailed Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti). Esther honoured invitations to forums, those organised by the likes of Frederick Elbert Foundation and other human rights organizations.

When she finally had access to me in Bama Prison, my wife literally transferred a mini supermarket to that wilderness. No trip cost her less than N50,000 and Esther would thereafter deposit up to N25,000 in my personal prison account. Throughout my

incarceration, Esther and the children received zero-assistance from NUPENG. For one thing, as I was being arrested, NUPENG was being taken over by a government-appointed Administrator. But I felt cross with my lieutenants too, that they really did not do what they should have done, knowing what we called “solidarity” in trade unionism. They could have collected money underground from the units and zones – I refer not to the official checkup dues – and used this to support my family. But for the four years that I languished in jail, my comrades did not as much as give my people One Naira.

When I returned, they apologised to me and blamed it on the Military-appointed administrators taking over the Secretariat. Even thereafter, I still had to fight for the payment of the backlog of my salaries, petitioning the National Executive Council of the union for the payment. The new Executive felt very bad that such a thing had happened and paid me every kobo owed me. I got about ₦1 million as backlog of salaries for those four years.

However, Esther and the children received support from very strange places. Justice Adewale Thompson has a younger brother, Mr. Ade Thompson, a man I never knew from Adam. His wife is a German, working in the German Embassy in Lagos. This German-trained Engineer rendered assistance to my family, making him one of the very few people who stood by us in our travails. He just appeared on my family’s doorsteps one day and began to give money to Esther and the children.

In those days, he ran a thriving engineering firm that handled government contracts. When Esther came to Bama and told me of this Good Samaritan, I felt so much gratitude that I determined that when we formed MKO’s government, he would be the first person I would connect to President Abiola for government contracts. I can’t quantify Ade Thompson’s contributions to my family. He remains one of the mysteries of God. He died recently. At his funeral, I

revealed his great acts of inestimable generosity to my family and everybody there confirmed that it was completely in his character.

With such assistance, Esther had the fortitude to weather the storm that befell the family in the period of my incarceration. She forged on almost single-handedly as breadwinner and head of family. This is the more reason why everybody feel pained that she remains confined to a sick bed from a stroke attack that knocked her down since 2002.

It was an affliction I least expected to hit my beloved Esther, a woman who took seriously her ministry to God and her ministrations to me. All through the June 12 struggle, Esther remained my resolute pillar. Absolutely loyal, she was golden to me. I found in her a companion and confidante during that era of uncertainty.

It had always been my dream that when they grew up, my children would one day work in the oil industry. As NUPENG General Secretary, I had the necessary contacts to get them such good appointments. Not a few people – some of them complete strangers to me – had secured employment in choice positions in that industry with just a note or a word from me. Those companies maintained international standards and opened a doorway of dreamlike opportunities for their employees. But as fate dictated, my children graduated from school during the period of my imprisonment, at a time when my hands were completely tied. Cordelia finished her Bachelors in Political Science from the University of Port Harcourt and began helping her mum to run Genesis Hotel, while simultaneously running around with human rights organisations like the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) and Frederick Elbert Foundation to secure freedom for her father. Frank (Jnr.) finished his Bachelor's degree in Economics, University of Calabar and took up the same cause.

For the large part, people commended them for my bravery and sacrifice. They went to places and once they identified themselves

as Kokoris, they easily received assistance. However, the activism of Cordelia and Franko soon turned them into potential targets for Abacha's goons. They reported getting anonymous letters. Anonymous phone calls too. People sometimes whispered threats to them on the streets. But those were isolated cases and I guess those mischief-makers were secret police operatives. The international community must have sensed danger to their lives as these two youngsters got more and more copiously quoted in the local and international Press and the Abacha regime brutally hounded, killed and bombed known activists.

The list of political killings quickly became long and frightening, and included famous environmentalist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and his eight Ogoni kinsmen, executed by the Abacha regime on November 10, 1995 after a kangaroo tribunal sentenced them on highly controversial murder charges at which they had no lawyers to defend them. On June 4, 1996, Kudirat Abiola, wife of the imprisoned President-elect, M.K.O. Abiola was shot dead at Ikeja, Lagos by unidentified men on her way to an appointment with the Canadian High Commissioner. Gunmen on January 14, 1997, shot at Senator Abraham Adesanya, the Deputy Chairman of NADECO, injuring him and damaging his car. On December 13, 1997, a bomb explosion at Murtala Muhammed Airport, Lagos, apparently aimed at Abacha's estranged Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Oladipo Diya, killed one Person. Diya himself escaped the explosion but was thrown into detention 10 days later over alleged involvement in a controversial coup plot. On February 26, 1998, armed men shot in Abeokuta, capital of Ogun State, Tunde Oladepo, a Journalist with The Guardian. Oladepo had recently written a story, criticising traditional rulers, including the chief of the local area, for endorsing the candidacy of General Abacha for President.

Against the backdrop of all these killings, democracy activists like Femi Falana. Abdul Oroh in CLO and Dr. Funmi Adewunmi of the Frederick Eibert Foundation liaised with the international community and took my children out of the country. Cordelia left through the “NADECO Route” on the excuse of going to collect on my behalf the George Meany Award for the “Most Outstanding Labour Leader for 1996” given by the American Federation of Labour/Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL/CIO). It was just an excuse to leave the country. The organization actually presented me the award personally in a big ceremony in Chicago after my release. Franco left through the “NADECO Route” too, when he went to collect in my stead the Elizabeth Fabe Award, given by the Dutch Federation of Labour (FNV) as the “Most Outstanding Human Rights and Labour Crusader for 1997.” From Amsterdam, Amnesty International in collaboration with the Dutch Federation and the American Federation ferried him into USA. These organizations immediately secured for my two children Asylum Status. They joined Nigerian exiles and continued campaigning abroad.

Cordelia quickly teamed up with Hafsat, Harvard-trained daughter of the Late Alhaja Kudirat and Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola. In time, the two girls became the “stars” of the Nigerian exiles’ international campaign, adding an unusual flavour to the NADECO crusade. Whenever they spoke, the audience easily got emotional. Even the usually taciturn Jewish Rabbis were moved to tears when the two girls addressed them. General Alani Akinrinade later told me that when Abacha’s propaganda machine in the USA became stifling, the exiles began to fear for the lives of the duo. Hafsat and Cordelia had become that much significant.

Once, when asked when last she saw her father, Cordelia reportedly answered: “I saw my father about 18 months ago before I left my native land, Nigeria. And when I saw him I hardly recognised

him again. My father looked very aged, frail and sick. I don't know whether I will ever see him alive again."

After such emotion-laden and arresting addresses by the girls, eminent exiles like Professor Wole Soyinka, Chief Anthony Enahoro and others would mount the dais to hammer home the need for urgency in the international handling of the Nigerian crisis.

For a long time, Cordelia did not pick up any job in the United States. But she was well on the ground there having easy access and quickly becoming a familiar face in the Senate, the Congress and many congressional caucuses. They knew her. Members of Labour in the US told me she made them proud. They showed me newspaper cuttings of how she confronted the President of Mobil International. She stood toe-to-toe with him in a public forum and publicly accused the company of complicity in the injustice that saw her father and other political prisoners languishing in jail. In September 2001, Simon Billenness, published on the Internet an item, "Speaking Truth to Power," about an incident highlighting Cordelia's campaign abroad and which I take delight to recall here:

At the 1998 Mobil annual shareholder meeting. I witnessed Cordelia Kokori speak truth to power. I was at the annual general meeting (AGM) to move a shareholder resolution, opposing Mobil's operations in Nigeria. Cordelia Kokori was there because her father, oil workers' union leader, Frank Kokori, had been imprisoned for leading a strike against Mobil's business partner, the Nigerian military junta. Before the AGM, we had urged Mobil officials to simply request a meeting with the jailed union leader. Mobil refused. At the AGM, Mobil CEO, Lucio Noto added insult to injury by disavowing all knowledge of Frank Kokori.

I walked with Cordelia Kokori up to the open microphone and stood beside her as she spoke. With incredible dignity,

she directly confronted Noto. "You say you don't know my father," accused Cordelia Kokori. "Let me tell you about my father." She then described how her father had been imprisoned without any communication with his family for four years.

I like to think that Cordelia Kokori shamed Noto that day. Forced to reply to her directly, Noto dramatically changed his stance. "I can't imagine what you and your family are going through," said Noto. "I will be in Nigeria this fall and I will bring up the case of your father and other political prisoners."

Shortly afterwards, a new military leader took power in Nigeria and proceeded to free all political prisoners. Frank Kokori was one of the first released.

Internet Source: **Website of Trillium Asset Management Corporation**

Upon my release, the President of Mobil Worldwide sent a congratulatory message to Cordelia. His letter had the undertone of "Now your father is free, you can leave me alone in peace." Today, she has picked up a job in the US. Her younger ones, Efe and Aghoghor, graduated from my Alma Mater, University of Ibadan, in 2001. They had gained admission during my incarceration. Our last born, Onome, went into UI after my release in 2000. The three later left Nigeria and joined their elder siblings abroad.

I did not like their sojourn abroad, but I could not blame them for Nigerian youths are grossly disillusioned with the sordid state of this badly mismanaged country. It remains a sad commentary in my life that when my wife had her stroke attack, she had none of her children around. I had to nurse her alone, assisted by househelps.

And what were the youths doing abroad? Nothing of note. Not any executive job. How many Ph.D holders leave this country today to do the most menial of jobs in a foreign country?

Sixteen

A LIFE ROOTED IN TRADE UNION STRUGGLES

All my young life, I had aspired to read Law. But hard luck had always trailed me in examinations. Spending seven years instead of five in the secondary school, I still finished with five credits after much struggle. Later, I thought that since I was studying Liberal Arts, I needed not do full-time studies in Higher School Certificate (HSC) when I could easily take the Rapid Result Correspondence Tuition at home. I was that confident. But I took the A-Level examinations in Economics, Economic History and British Constitution and scored very low grades (Ds and Es). This was too poor for Law.

A repeat attempt yielded a similar result and I became frustrated. Thereafter in 1966, I took up a job with the Electricity Corporation of Nigeria (ECN). In ECN, I worked in a rather technical department—the Meter Installation Group (MIG) in the Commercial Section that was loaded with white engineers who each had the title of “Commercial Officer.” My white bosses saw that I had talent and drive. They used to call me the youngest OC (Officer in Charge) in ECN because, within 18 months of my appointment, I began heading a sub-section – the Tariff Section, reporting directly to the white Chief Commercial Engineer.

Just like regular engineers, I was assigned to read Maximum Demand Meters with the Comm. Engineers, installed in giant industries like Ewekoro Cement Factory, Nigerian Breweries and Cadbury, which all paid gigantic bills. Thus, at a very early age, I was doing such readings of Maximum Demand Meters and doing their assessments; so I was doing a very important job right from when I left secondary school. I usually had a Land Rover or Kombi bus attached to me with a driver. I had the world under my feet. If I wanted to make millions then, nothing would have stopped me; all I needed do was underbill these companies in return for personal settlement.

The only African at the top was Mr. Lardner, a Lagosian with a British wife. He and others encouraged me to study Electrical Engineering, sponsored by ECN. The first phase would be at the Yaba College of Technology after which I would go abroad for the final phase. But I turned down their advice, telling them Engineering was not in my blood, although I did the job well. I spent five-and-a-half years (1966 to 1971) at ECN. Working out voltages and calculating tariffs did not just fit into how I fancied spending the rest of my life.

Those days, my elder brother, Sam Kokori, occupied a top position in Lever Brothers (himself and Michael Omolayole being the very first two Nigerian graduates in the company; my brother read Law and Omolayole read Mathematics). Samuel Kokori had in 1952 become the first Urhobo man to obtain an LL.B. from a recognised university, University of Durham. My father's first son, he was a contemporary of Anthony Enahoro at King's College, Lagos between 1941 and 1946. Urhobos were immensely proud of him. Sam felt I had talent (especially having made my A-Levels around 1968) and one day he told me, "You see, the Field Sales Managers that we have don't even have your qualification and they make a lot of money. So why are you wasting your time in ECN? Come to Lever

Brothers (then one of the solid companies in the country), within six months you will become a Field Sales Manager in the Marketing Department. I know you will make it. In ECN, you cannot make it because you are not an engineer.” Wise counselling.

With that, in 1971, I attended an interview at Lever Brothers. Although I did very well in both the aptitude test and the oral, I failed to meet with one of the requirements for the job – having a Driving Licence. However, because of my performance at the oral and written tests, they waived that requirement and employed me in November 1971 as a District Sales Representative in Lagos. With a driver attached to me, I serviced UTC, Leventis, Kingsway and other outlets.

But tragedy soon struck my family in January 1972 when my brother Sam died suddenly. It was a big blow. Death took the star of the Kokori family.

However, life went on. In Lever Brothers, lowly educated managers began to take over from the whites who were leaving because of the indigenisation policy of the General Yakubu Gowon regime. The new henchmen proved oppressive, feeling their positions and career threatened by the bright and educated youngsters. Some had risen up from the post of Sales Driver. I felt the pinch personally when they told me to remain in Lagos as a Sales Representative, a much lower rank than my dream assignment outside Lagos as a Field Sales Manager. That apart, they tried curtailing my independent streak.

I will give you an example. Lever Brothers usually issued each Sales Representative with white shirts and blue trousers matched with a tie branded with the company logo, LBN. Most times I would refuse to use my LBN tie. Why should I be tagged? Why should I just show up somewhere and everybody immediately knows by my tie that I work for LBN? One Sales Manager began to caution me

about my refusal to use the tie and later began pestering me about my inability to drive. I went straight to complain to the Marketing Director, Mr. Freeman. The top Nigerians were all flabbergasted that I had defied protocol to lodge my grievance directly with the MD and decided to put my promotion at bay. Therefore, barely a year with the company, I concluded that Lever Brothers was no place for me. I quit in 1972.

However, I still could not gain admission with my low A-Level grades. But one day, I read an advert in the papers – University of Ibadan had just begun running a new diploma programme in Industrial Relations and Trade Unionism. The name looked so romantic that I immediately fell in love with the course.

The university provided concessionary entrance for the programme. In addition to the basic qualification of five O-Levels, the programme indicated that possessing A-Levels stood candidates at an advantage and they must have been trade union leaders or personnel officers for up to five years. My closest link to unionism was my involvement with ECN's house union, for Lever Brothers had banned anybody from my Sales Department getting involved in unionism. On the basis of my ECN union activity, I applied for the UI programme, passed the entrance examinations and gained admission in 1973, along with John Kolawole (present General Secretary of the Trade Union Congress) and others. On campus, I joined the Black Nationalist Movement. In my two years in the university, I became more radical and socialist. Actually, that was the time I started calling myself 'Comrade'. The programme proved exciting and enlightening, for we had lecturers like Comrade Ola Oni, Professor Tomori (Head of Department), Dr. Omafume Onoge and Dr. Soley. They treated us as matured students. However, the Diploma programme was very intensive. I had as roommate Tunde Thompson (The Guardian Journalist jailed alongside Nduka Irabor

during the Buhari-Idiagbon regime through the instrumentality of the draconian Decree 4) reading Political Science. Thus, I did the crash Diploma programme and graduated in 1974.

It looked like God was trying to compensate me for the years I lost in secondary school for as soon as I finished from UI, jobs immediately lined up for my picking, including offers from the United Bank for Africa and the Federal Ministry of Labour. I chose to work in the Ministry. However, bureaucracy delayed my being fully processed into the Ministry, although I resumed there. For three months, I did not even have a desk or an office.

One day, I saw an advert in the newspapers saying a big trade union organisation's General Secretary in Central Lagos needed an assistant. Because of my training, I was becoming much interested in unionism. I applied and they called me for an interview. Lo and behold, it was Babs Animashaun, a prominent unionist in the country.

At that time, Nigeria had more than 1,000 unions. Union general secretaries like Animashaun, Wahab Goodluck and S.U. Bassey operated like legal practitioners, holding the briefs of as many unions as possible. They were powerful. They registered the unions, "owned" them and collected their check-off dues. Babs Animashaun was one of the best. He ran these unions from an office at 9, Nnamdi Azikiwe Street, in central Lagos.

On the interview day, many applicants came with big degrees; some had Masters from America and other places. But I guess I somehow impressed National Union of Nigerian Bank Employees, NUNBE's interview panel, because Animashaun sat me down and spoke with me after the exercise.

"We know you are working with the Ministry," he said. "But can you resume with us on Monday?" It was a Friday. I said: "What do you mean? I must tell the people at the Ministry that I want to go before I leave them."

“Look, we want you. People may brainwash you outside that trade unionists never do well. But of all my classmates at Methodist Boys High School, some are doctors, some are lawyers, but today, none is as successful as Babs Animashaun.” And the man was not being immodest. A very charismatic labour leader, he was rich, a typical African capitalist through and through, even though he was a union man.

Animashaun owned an array of choice cars and his mass transportation buses plied the city of Lagos, apart from inter-state haulage fleet branded “Eko Round City Transport.” In addition, he had Babs Animashaun Holdings. Animashaun’s NUNBE had a chain of bank house unions in its coffers —Barclays Bank, National Bank of Nigeria, WEMA Bank, United Bank for Africa, etc. Comrade Pepple ran a parallel union. But in addition, NUNBE’s account also had big unions like the Mighty Cooperative Conglomerate in Ibadan, Japanese Petroleum, Lagos State Development and Property Corporation (LSDPC, formerly LEDB), Agip and British Petroleum. Although the law in operation forbade an individual General Secretary from handling more than three unions, Animashaun got wiser than the rule.

Animashaun amalgamated the bank unions into his National Union of Nigerian Bank Employees (NUNBE), something allowed by the law. In addition, he recruited assistants that he presented to the Registrar of trade unions as the General Secretary of his other client unions.

I sought advice on Babs Animashaun’s job offer and many people discouraged me, saying there was too much risk in trade union business and it lacked job security. However, I decided to ignore these doubters and joined the NUNBE Secretariat in 1965.

I was told by all the workers that Animashaun was a slave driver but under him I had my tutelage in trade unionism. The only other

graduate working for Animashaun then was the colourful Akin Sobo from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, employed as an Organising Secretary. Although Animashaun would use his influence and bravado to get what he wanted at negotiations, he simply was not organised. He did not even have the Trade Union Act of 1973, the “Bible” of trade union operations in the country. And when I came on board as Special Assistant to the General Secretary, I took as priority the task of putting order to his operations and immediately went out to acquire reference materials for the office. With that, my boss immediately had high regard for me. He made me General Secretary of several unions in his chambers. But actually as my boss, I reported to him.

The unions paid directly to him and he paid me a salary. Animashaun assigned me to cover the Chanrai Group of Companies and the British Petroleum Workers Union, of which he made me General Secretary and gave me a free hand. This began an exciting phase of my life. I traveled a lot. In fact, my first trip across the country I owe to trade unionism. Erstwhile, I had never traveled anywhere outside my native Warri other than Onitsha and Lagos. In fact, all the trips I made in my life have been through unionism. But I also had luck on my side, unlike most of his previous assistants who did not enjoy the confidence of clients that would always want Alhaji Animashaun to personally handle big negotiations (although, in reality, he was human, a big wealthy businessman with three wives who could not handle things personally all the time), clients and Animashaun reposed trust in me. Even Animashaun, flamboyant with his Idi Amin stature, felt proud to introduce me all the time to the boards of companies, board of bluechip companies, companies commanding the economic heights of the country. He would then add, “He is a graduate from the University of Ibadan and a competent negotiator. Even if I am not present, he can handle negotiations on my behalf.”

Although I was not influenced by his wealth, we had something in common. Like Animashaun's, my own philosophy of life dictated that I look decent. With that mindset, I never appeared wretched throughout all my days in unionism; I dressed decently, unlike many other union men noted on the streets for their worn-out shoes and threadbare trousers. For me, it was always a suit. In this regard, Animashaun really helped me. He told me that unionism was the way people took it to be. So I learnt decent dressing, carriage and confidence from that time with Animashaun. Fortunately too, my union members themselves wanted someone who looked decent and could face their management.

We earned a monthly salary of about ₦250, big money in those days. In addition, any union I handled usually paid me a transport fare of about ₦50 per month. Later I insisted on having a new car. Animashaun never bought new cars for his staffers. But Animashaun knew that losing me would jeopardise his operations, so he told me to make a one-third down payment on the total cost of a car of my choice, while he served as my Guarantor to National Bank, the bank handling the account of his Eko Round City Transport. Thus, in 1976, I bought my first car, a "big car" —a Morris Marina Estate.

However, Animashaun soon faced a big cog in his operations. With the trade union reformation in 1976, the General Obasanjo regime ordered a trade union enquiry. Animashaun as a very successful Labour leader immediately came under focus. When the panel came in and saw his vast outlay of properties, the members were bewildered, queried their source and summoned Animashaun to answer charges. Animashaun and I went to the tribunal, with his brother as his defence lawyer. The government had gone to probe his background and came with a profile of his wealth and properties, using a qualified Chartered Accountant, Mr. Okafor, who dug up figures and account numbers and property addresses.

From proceedings at the tribunal, it became plain that government was bent on seizing most of his properties; and Animashaun did not help his own cause by his responses to queries.

The Chairman, Justice Adebisi, told him, “Babs Animashaun, you have toyed with this panel, but I am not going to toy with you, if at the end you cannot give good explanations on how you came about these possessions.”

For the first time since I knew him, Animashaun was visibly shaken and quite completely lost his composure. Yet he had a simple, legitimate explanation for his wealth.

Animashaun took loans from places like United Bank for Africa (UBA), using a corporate name under which he was legally entitled to take loans – Babs Animashaun Holdings Company – and which was different from the trade union outfit, NUNBE. But Animashaun lacked the composure or the technicality to make his case.

Thus, I told Babs, “You must get a good lawyer and one Chartered Accountant before we go back tomorrow.” We immediately rushed to Tunji Braithwaite at his Broad Street office. Then, Braithwaite was a clean-shaven man in continental suit. Brought up and educated in the United Kingdom, Braithwaite spoke very well. He was one of the brightest lawyers, and he had an office on Broad Street. We found a team of chartered accountants too.

When we returned to the tribunal with our new allies, the tables turned. With Tunji leading Animashaun’s team of lawyers, the government team looked stupid and Okafor, the government’s Chartered Accountant, now had problems. Tunji Braithwaite, armed with figures supplied by Animashaun’s hired chartered accountants, immediately put Okafor on the defence. All this saved Animashaun and got him off the hook. At the end of the day, the government could only ban him from trade union practice in essential service areas.

But finally, Animashaun and I fell apart and had to part ways. Like a typical Nigerian Capitalist, he offended me. When Animashaun got proscribed from unionism, the onus virtually fell on me to run his Secretariat. I fronted for him as the General Secretary, receiving cheques and monies and duly depositing everything into my account. I never took a kobo for myself but returned every kobo back to him.

At a time, a crippling bank strike took hold of the country's jugular. When the security people came, Animashaun had disappeared. They picked me up. Yet, after I had done all these things for Animashaun, he refused to compensate me. I left Animashaun's service in 1978 when the industrial unions began to emerge. That year, government had decreed the restructuring of the trade unions and pegged the more than 1,000 unions to 42. One option open to me was to join the banks' union, where Animashaun's Secretariat had had a big holding. But with Animashaun specially proscribed from such essential service areas, this gave Comrade Pepple that whole field, and it was not hard for me to realise that my association with Animashaun had "marked" me, and Pepple and his team would stifle me should I show up at the Banks Conference. There was another big confederation, the Consolidated Petroleum Oil Workers, run by Asiya Out, an older man. I decided to go into the petroleum sector, basically because I came from an oil-producing area.

On November 2, 1977, oil workers inaugurated the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) at the Cultural Centre, Benin in the then Mid-Western State. Back then I had the reputation of being a troublesome gadfly. At the campaigns, I came with my own line-up of aspirants. Our rivals were older unionists, people who regarded us as too young to merit the position of union leaders. By then, I set my aspiration on being NUPENG General Secretary (GS), having already gained experience as a very

young General Secretary under Animashaun. After their election, the new executives would appoint the General Secretary, who would serve as the Chief Executive of the union. Actually, that was the real battle—who becomes the General Secretary? All what GS aspirants like Otu and myself were fighting for, was to put in an Executive well disposed to appointing us into that position. And to my advantage, some of the delegates had heard about me through the “Labour Page” of Daily Times and other newspapers.

My line-up was to sponsor Comrade Horsfall of Shell for the post of NUPENG President. His rival was Enas Dubre of Agip, who came on the bill of the oldies. With Shell having the biggest delegates, we would have won a landslide victory. But about a week to the election, Shell workers went on a “crazy strike”, a wildcat action; and government quickly proscribed Shell and that automatically disqualified Shell and Horsfall from the conference. Nominations had closed before Shell’s proscription, so we had no way to replace Horsfall. We went to the Conference and Dubre became the President. Our man for Vice President, Comrade Joseph Akinlaja, beat his opponent with one vote.

Instead of being General Secretary, I became Deputy General Secretary to Chief Asiya Otu, while Chief G.O. Amadi and Chief Oloko took the post of Assistant General Secretary. But the union did something to my advantage; ensuring that my wages and Otu’s were very close. When the General Secretary received about ₦8,000 per annum. I as the Deputy General Secretary got over ₦7,000 and Chief Amadi and Chief Oloko, as AGSs, earned ₦3,500.

However, from the day the union started operation (after government gave the first grant of ₦1 million to the Nigeria Labour Congress and ₦10,000 to each of the 42 industrial unions) NUPENG’s General Secretary, Asiya Otu, could not perform because he had health problems and spent much time in hospital and under medication. That made me to act for him most of the time. I later

became substantive General Secretary when Asiya Otu was retired in 1981.

NUPENG CRISIS

A crisis suddenly broke out in NUPENG, triggered off barely three years into Dubre's tenure as NUPENG President, when his employers, Nigerian Agip Oil Company, announced his "promotion" to a supposedly management position, a move that meant he no longer belonged in NUPENG, a union for junior staff. The issue split NUPENG into two camps. One camp consisted of people like Otu who wanted Dubre to immediately resign as President; the other camp comprised unionists like Joseph Akinlaja, Dubre and I, who felt it would be a dangerous precedent to allow the budding union to be thus "decapitated" at management's whims and that Dubre should remain in order to help the union stabilise.

The crisis began very close to when I would depart the country for Holland to do a Master's programme in Labour and Development Studies, at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) at The Hague, The Netherlands. To some, my leaving for Holland at that point in time amounted to going to play when my house was on fire. In truth, however, we took the unfolding crisis as a small matter that would quickly blow over.

On the other hand, a lot of people also convinced me that I was not growing younger and the scholarship provided a rare opportunity. The Dutch Government scholarship came with a package paid in foreign exchange that covered tuition and some allowances. I was the only one picked from the whole of West Africa in my discipline, and people with good first degrees had been turned down after the coordinating Federal Ministry of National Planning decided that my Diploma from the University of Ibadan, combined with the trainings I had undergone in institutions all over the world and my working experience, was equivalent to a degree. NUPENG's NEC met and resolved to give me study leave with full pay.

I flew out to Holland in early 1983. Apparently, I had underestimated the crisis brewing in NUPENG. The rebellion broke out from Warri Zone. I thought they would not last, not knowing they had godfathers in the industry. When I was in Holland, they secured court injunctions to operate NUPENG's account and immediately stopped my salary in February 1984.

I came from Holland for the NLC Convention in 1984 because the NUPENG President, Enas Dubre, was vying for NLC presidency. As far as I was concerned, the NLC conference would simply serve to crown NUPENG Comrade Enas Dubre the second President of the new NLC after Comrade Hassan Sunmonu have completed his term. Obviously, Dubre was my candidate for the NLC job. In fact, his candidature to the NLC throne also precipitated the NUPENG crisis. But when I landed at the Murtala Muhammed Airport, Ikeja, Lagos, the first paper I bought, National Concord, carried the story, "Kokori, Dubre Restrained." I was just arriving from Holland! How could I be in Holland and be restrained in Nigeria? So I decided to ignore the court ruling and fly to Enugu for the conference. You can't restrict me when you did not serve me any paper. I was with my wife at the Lagos airport on the way to Enugu when I saw Linus Ukamba and Alphonsus Okwese, Deputy General Secretary and General Secretary respectively, of the rebel faction of NUPENG at the airport. They laughed and said, "Look at you, you are looking very fresh. But you have been restrained. Your people are coming; Dubre is coming with Akinlaja on the next flight. All your people are coming back. Dubre is no more contesting any election."

This development aborted my trip to Enugu. I spent my two-week holiday shuttling between Aka Bashorun's Law chambers and the high court, but the substantial motion was still not taken. I returned to Holland at the end of the holiday.

I finally rounded off in December 1984. That day in December 1984, I received my Masters degree and immediately headed for Schipol Airport to board a plane to Nigeria in order to attend the conference being held by my faction to elect new NUPENG leaders. Fortunately or unfortunately, I did not meet the proceedings because the conference held at midnight to counter the rival faction that went to court and secured ex-parte motion to stop the election. Meanwhile, all our delegates had shown up at the River Valley Hotel; venue of the conference in Warri. Ministry of Labour officials from Lagos, several presidents and general secretaries of industrial unions, including representatives of NLC, had arrived to observe and show solidarity to our NUPENG group. Since the injunction had not been served on anybody, our faction roused all delegates from sleep and quickly held the conference from 12 midnight to 6.30am of the scheduled December 14.

Leaders of the rival Uzegbu faction came with police to serve the injunction in the morning, only to meet the notice that the conference had already held and Samuel Adewunmi Dada had become the President in place of Enas Dubre.

Subsequently, we hired Barrister Alao Aka-Bashorun to lead our team of lawyers and secured an injunction against our rivals which was granted by Justice Candido Johnson, the Chief Judge of Lagos State. This, for the first time, gave us a legal edge over the rival faction.

However, we immediately ran into a fresh problem, this time with the Bank Manager, Mr. Agumu of Sabo Yaba branch of the Union Bank, where NUPENG had its account. He was loyal to our rivals and denied us right to operate the account on the ground that he needed the advice of the Legal Department at the bank headquarters in Marina, Lagos. From the ₦600, 000 originally in the account, he allowed the rival faction to whittle down the holding

to ₦19, 000. But despite our court injunction, the man subsequently refused to release the money to us.

Notwithstanding this problem, we were firmly in charge. One day, we used the opportunity of this legal advantage to raid the illegal secretariat of this other faction. I supervised the operation, with Comrades Akinlaja and Okougbo acting as field commanders, leading a contingency of three bus-loads of militant union cadres for the operation. As this operation was going on at the rebel faction secretariat at Ebute Metta, I rushed to the divisional police station on Denton Street to brief the police DPO of our mission. I decided to act thus in order to forestall any misinformation to the police. Our boys took over the place and carried all the union equipment to Western Avenue, our authentic Secretariat.

Next, we dealt with the Bank Manager. After tolerating his delay for one month, I took it upon myself to go and meet the bank's Legal Adviser at Union Bank Headquarters at Marina, Lagos and the man gave me a copy of the letter he had long dispatched to our Sabo Branch Manager, granting him the go-ahead to deal with us, the new custodians of the account.

So just after the New Year, 1986 (we had secured the judgment in 1985), I took three bus-loads of my cadres with the President and my deputies, and we went straight to the bank. It appeared that doing things the legalistic way was not getting us much result. When we got there, the Bank Manager quickly phoned the police that armed robbers had raided the bank; and that police should hurry down there with guns. Unknown to him, the police was already aware of the situation because I had first gone to the Sabo Police Station to inform the DPO we had come to deal with the Manager for holding our money despite a duly obtained court injunction.

I just went to the office of Mr. Agumu, and I said: "How are you?" He said, "Happy New Year." I said, "Happy New Year? This is not a

Happy New Year matter.” He said, “What is all this?” I said, “Agumu, you were lying when you said that you’ve not received directives on NUPENG account from your Legal Adviser. Your Legal Adviser has sent the clearance and this is a copy, saying that you should deal with us. Up till now, you’ve not done it. Get me a new cheque now now for the account.”

He said, “Kokori, this is still New Year. You are not supposed to come in this manner.” I said, “No... no, this is not a Happy New Year thing. Sign the cheque book right now. The other group withdrew ₦600,000 from this account, you did not say one thing.” All my men had taken over the whole place.

Agumu saw the handwriting on the wall and realised the game was up, for we did not even allow him to move. He called his Accountant, who quickly brought a new cheque book to my trustees. Then we withdrew the money, leaving no more than ₦100 in the account. First we paid staff salaries. With that money we started operating the Secretariat. Bank staffers were just staring at us.

However, the taste of victory did not last long. After some time, our rivals got a counter-order from an Appeal Court, banning us from operating the bank account again. It became a ding-dong affair. They won a court injunction one day; then we won another one to counter their own: then they would go and secure another court order. Even then, we had not settled the substantial case. We had 14 substantive cases and we failed to prosecute anyone to conclusion.

With all this, I realised that these court cases could drag on till kingdom come, even after we had all grown old and died. In any case, the stress was becoming too much for me.

It was then I called my deputies, “Since I came back from Holland, if we had money on the ground, I would have retired. The ministries say the other people are the leaders, the employers say the same.

But it is workers that own the union, not the employers. I am not ready to continue in this shame, I will fight this battle until we have result. I am not going to the Supreme Court or any other place any more. We are going on the streets. We will call a strike and test who is the head of the union. If our people obey our call, we will warn the government in a Press conference that the government should step into the union problem. They should remove everything on ground and help us organise a fresh conference. So gentlemen are we ready to fight?”

My lieutenants bought my idea. Thus, on Monday 16th May 1986, we called out NUPENG members on strike. Everything was grounded across the country. Not one litre of petrol was lifted anywhere.

Rear Admiral Patrick Koshoni, Minister in charge of the Ministry of Labour under the new General Ibrahim Babangida regime, immediately summoned to his office NNPC chiefs, the management of the oil industry like Shell, Chevron, Texaco and other big oil multinationals. Many expatriates also came. He also invited Ministry of Labour officials, NLC officers and two people from our own NUPENG group and two from the rival group. We all waited in the Ministry of Labour conference room. The television cameras with the Press men were there too. Finally, Koshoni showed up with an array of government officials, dressed in the crisp, immaculate white of the Nigerian Navy. He just sat down and read his address.

In essence, Koshoni said, “Kokori, your faction is illegal. The Richard Uzegbu faction is recognised by the government. And the strike going on is illegal, Kokori, your faction is given just 12 hours to call off the strike, failing which the Petroleum Sabotage Act shall be invoked against you. This administration is not to be controlled by anybody.”

At the end, he entertained no contributions, no questions, nothing. He immediately got up and went back to his office.

The government's man had been so brusque, so brash, it was almost frightening. Members of the rival group were highly elated. Many felt sorry for us. Not a few of the local and foreign oil directors must have thought, "Yes, this Kokori man has met his Waterloo." People came with all sorts of advice. Some said I should go underground. Some people said I should give up the struggle. Against the backdrop of the fresh execution of General Mamman Vatsa and his group, for alleged coup plotting, everyone felt we were dealing with a blood-thirsty junta and we would do best to drop the confrontation.

My deputies and I sat down with other leaders of the union to determine what next to do. We reached a consensus to carry on the fight and particularly determined that Lagos, the seat of power, must be completely starved of fuel, even if the strike failed in other states.

So by 5am (the next day?), I drove out with Akinlaja to Ejigbo, a satellite station depot, where we found most of our members sleeping in their tankers. When they saw a car with lights driving round, they came out, aiming to confront the intruder and enforce the strike. When they identified us, they chanted: "Oh, Kokori our leader. Good man, good man. Kokori, go ahead. Kokori, you're our leader, go ahead."

Oh, I felt elated at their reaction. Great joy and satisfaction coursed through my whole being, giving me the courage to carry on even in the face of death. Instead of heeding counsel to disappear underground, I decided to confront issues head-on: "The fight has just started."

So I went back to the office and briefed my people in the morning. All the news I got about the strike made me very happy. People

came with reports from Mosinmi, Apapa, Warri and Ibadan. After I finished with them, I decided to go and brief the Nigeria Labour Congress about the action.

Unknown to me, my Secretariat had been cordoned off by security men, led by a female SSS Agent with 30 operatives. As I climbed down the stairs, I met the woman coming upstairs. NLC people were just mounting the stairs too; they had come for NUPENG's briefing on the strike. We all met on the narrow stairs.

The female SSS operative said, "Look, Frank, do not panic. You are being taken to our headquarters. Just pack. Collect any file that you think will be useful, because we don't know when you will come back."

I thus went back upstairs to pick my files. When we returned to the ground floor, there was this struggle as NLC officers wanted me to join their van; the security people too wanted me in their vehicle for the trip to Awolowo Road. I told the NLC chiefs to allow me go in the security agent's vehicle while they should just follow. Ironically, as that struggle was going on, my other members were coming from various parts of the country. So I was being arrested in their presence along with my President, Samuel Adewunmi Dada. That threw a fresh challenge to the NUPENG members, who intensified serious "mobilization" on the basis that, since their leaders had been apprehended, the strike must be protected and properly carried out at all costs. Tanker drivers themselves vowed that any tanker driver caught on the road would be burnt inside his truck.

At the Awolowo Road office of the SSS, initially, the agents were so nasty and rude to us, asking us questions like: "Do you know the Petroleum Sabotage Act? Do you know that the situation you have caused can fetch you a sentence under the Anti-Sabotage Act? Bla... bla..."

Their behaviour and threats never bothered me. Towards evening, they took us to their Director, who said: “Well, we are glad to see you. But what recommendation do you really want to make to solve this situation?”

Apparently, they had come to realise that threats did not work and oil workers were not moving. It was later that I knew that the NLC President had breezed into the security headquarters, and Alli Chiroma told the Director of the SSS, “Look, you are wasting your time because the man you are holding is in charge of the oil union. The people you called the leaders are not on ground. You see what is happening; oil workers have refused to return to work. And I, as a leader of the Congress, I am telling you that trade unions are not formed in the courts but by the worker themselves.”

That seemed to have struck the right chord. By 6pm, the government had started piping down and they started treating me nicely. Then they said they wanted to take me home straight to my family: that they did not want to keep me overnight. The security agents took me with their own vehicle, and delivered me home.

The following day, the government sent a Federal Government-owned CVU car to ferry me for a meeting by 12 noon. But by then, I had gone to NLC to join their mini-bus, so the CVU car missed me.

When we got there, members of the other group were there. Press men too were outside. Finally, Koshoni arrived in the hall and as soon as he sat down, the Minister told the Press to leave, as he wanted to have a “brother-to-brother” discussion with us! It was a remarkable difference from our last meeting.

Settling down to meet the union factions and NLC, Koshoni proceeded to open the talks with the words, “Kokori, to be honest with you, we are not against you. But anything you can do for solution, please do. We’re not supporting any group. It is just the courts. You know when the Appeal Court makes a ruling, we can’t go against it. So your recommendation will be looked into.”

I presented my recommendation. All we wanted was for the government to make a decree, superseding the Appeal Court and throwing out all 14 cases related to the NUPENG crisis. Koshoni promised to look into this. With this understanding, I went on the NTA 9pm news and on that live programme, I summoned my people to take the next available flights to Lagos before 12 noon the following day. We held our meeting the following day and called off the action, to reciprocate the Military administration's good gesture. By 4pm, the tankers started rolling once more.

That sent the unequivocal signal to government that the Kokori/Dada faction was indeed in charge. The Minister, Rear Admiral Koshoni, thereafter, met us and confessed he had been misled by Ministry officials. He took NUPENG's files directly to the Minister of Justice, to handle the extracting of the whole matter from the court and they drafted one decree to nullify all the 14 cases. The union factions were dissolved in the budget speech of 1986, broadcast on 31st December 1986 by General Babangida. Thus, the two rival general secretaries and presidents were removed from NUPENG. All other staff remained in their posts. Actually these formed part of my recommendations to the government. An administrator, Dr. Olorunfunmi Shonubi, Head of the Department of Industrial Relations at the University of Ibadan won the mandate as the Sole Administrator of NUPENG. His terms of reference were to run the union and organise fresh elections for the leadership of the NUPENG.

Shonubi's reorganisation lasted three months, January to April, 1986, during which I went without pay. He was a hard-working Administrator and by April 14, helped organise the whole elections across the country, the four zonal conferences and the national conference. Fortunately, I had a car, a brand new SR Peugeot Saloon car. I flew that car across the country to mobilise my people for the

various conferences. The so-called General Secretary of the other group did not even show up to mobilise his people. In all, it was total victory for my group.

We won in Warri, Kaduna and Lagos zones. In Port-Harcourt, because that was their seat, the rebels had a slight majority. The National Conference held around May 1986 at the Nigeria Labour Congress's Michael Imoudu Hall was the final of finals. Our victory was overwhelming; a landslide victory.

The newly-elected executive led by the President, Adewunmi Dada from Chevron (whom we sponsored against their Bestman Iheanacho), immediately made an announcement: "We recall (they did not want to say "appoint" so it won't seem we were having a fresh tenure) our General Secretary, Frank Kokori." And so I returned to my seat as NUPENG General Secretary.

When I came back into the union, I had a big disappointment. I had run NUPENG frugally, leaving almost ₦600,000 in our two bank accounts, with which we planned to build a big headquarters for NUPENG. It was big money. In fact, it came to more than \$600,000. Let's imagine \$1.2 million and convert it to Naira today and those were the days when a Peugeot car sold for about ₦6,000. The rebels squandered that entire huge sum. So the NUPENG crisis brought me real heartbreak.

Some of my staff had taken sides before I came back from Holland, although most came to apologise to me that they became turncoats because of penury – no salary was coming so they moved to the other side that had money to pay salaries. Most of the staff from the other side got sacked by the National Executive Council. They pleaded. They went to court. They did a lot of things. But we kept them out of the union. For the ones that had remained loyal, we sat back and worked out their benefits; the arrears of what they had lost throughout the period of the three-year crisis from 1984 to 1987.

Having taken over from Koshoni as the new Labour Minister, Major General Ike Nwachukwu conducted the formal handing over to us. Thenceforth, government became nice to us and accorded full recognition to NUPENG, while the Ministry of Labour, erstwhile hostile to us, became friendly throughout Major General Ike Nwachukwu's tenure. Major General Nwachukwu soon demonstrated his faith in NUPENG with a very unusual gesture.

Kokori Appointed CRC Member

The Babangida's transition regime had as major programme, the transition to civil rule, beginning with the drafting of a new Constitution. When time came to draft people into the Constitution Review Committee, government gave only one slot to Labour. The government also knew that NLC might select its representative on the basis of seniority, even if such a person proved intellectually incompetent to sit with the calibre of people lined up to draft the Constitution, some of them professors and legal luminaries. Apart from that, there would be too many meetings called to select such a Labour nominee.

Thus, the government decided to appoint a representative for Labour. The Minister of Labour, Ike Nwachukwu, after consulting with his predecessor, Patrick Koshoni, decided to choose me as the Labour candidate. I had no inkling of all this until one day when I got a phone call in the office from the Director General of the Ministry of Labour, telling me the Honorable Minister wanted to see me. I honoured the invitation the next morning. The Minister, Brigadier Ike Nwachukwu, told me how they came about nominating me. He said government had made up its mind on every other nominee and there were fears that I would throw back the job because of my radical posture, especially if I only heard my name on the television and radio without prior consultations with me.

He told me, “Look, look.., this is one of the greatest honours anyone can get in this country, to draft the Constitution of your country. Personally, if government gives me a choice, whether to be a Minister or to be in the Constitution Drafting Committee, honestly, I have been a Governor before; this time around, I would like to be in the Constitution Drafting Committee.” Thoroughly humbled by this unexpected gesture, I told him, “It is okay, I accept.”

They promised to draft a letter to the NLC. This was around July 1987. Three weeks later, I was in Maiduguri at the opening ceremony of the National Conference of Nurses and Midwives, alongside Alli Chiroma, NLC President, when that evening, the broadcast media announced the names of the 45 members of the CRC, with my name included.

Initially, a clique in the NLC expressed exception at the way my nomination had been made and indeed forwarded the name of a replacement. But NUPENG fought back and the Ministry of Labour ignored the clique’s protest and stuck to its earlier decision to have me in the CRC. With that, NLC succumbed. Within 24 hours, the Ministry of Justice sent me a letter. The Presidency sent me a letter. The Ministry of Labour sent me a letter. And finally, NLC sent me a letter also. So I was the only man who went to Abuja during the inauguration with four appointment letters.

But a little drama took place at the swearing-in. One Etim Inyang, Principal of an Army Command Secondary School, flew down to Abuja when he heard his name on the television, and he was sworn in. The man said that he was thanking God that some of his students’ parents must have recommended him to government. He had spent two days with us in Abuja at the Nicon Noga Hilton Hotel, when another man with the same name suddenly appeared on the scene. The School Principal was the wrong Etim Inyang. He had to leave.

Actually, I had the encouragement of my union to go to the CRC. And it proved quite refreshing because I met a lot of people. I met prominent Nigerians, who had made their marks in their various callings.

Seventeen

MY OMPADEC MISADVENTURE

Recognising the unique characteristics of the Niger-Delta region, the Sir Henry Willink's Commission in 1958 recommended that the Federal Government of Nigeria should give the region special developmental attention. This was long before crude oil became critical to Nigeria's revenue earnings. In accepting Willink's recommendation, the Federal Government established the Niger-Delta Development Board (NDDB) in 1960, to fulfill the country's vision of running an interventionist body that would bring palliative projects to communities in the Niger-Delta region. However, NDDB could not make significant impact in its seven years of existence and later succumbed to the incursion of the military and the civil war.

The civilian regime of Alhaji Shehu Shagari established a Presidential Task Force (popularly known as the 1.5 percent Committee) in 1980 and allocated 1.5 percent of the Federation Account to the committee for its assignment in the Niger-Delta region. Although the committee existed until 1992, it also proved very ineffective, with only a few projects and benefits to show for all the funding it received.

In 1992, the General Ibrahim Babangida regime announced plans to replace that committee with the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC), with an allocation of 3 percent of Federal oil revenue for its operation.

I knew about these developments but took no particular interest. However, Delta State Governor then, Chief Felix Ibru, soon got me involved. Perhaps respecting my political weight as Delta's highest officer in SDP, where I held the post of National Financial Secretary, Chief Ibru told me that OMPADEC was coming on stream and the post of secretary had been zoned to Delta State, being the second largest oil-producing state. Rivers State as the largest producer got the post of chairman. Governor Ibru could not say which of the two officers would be the Chief Executive Officer. He asked me to scout around for the right person to fill the Delta slot, stipulating that the person should be from the oil-producing area of the state.

Sometime later, he called to find out my nominee for the position, but I asked for more time. He hesitated and said, "What of yourself?" "Me? Olorogun, "I have too many commitments already," I replied. "But this one is different. This is an interventionist assignment that will develop our region. You are always talking about union, union, union; why can't you forget your union for once and handle this job for our people? You are the only person I can trust to do this job."

His frank assertions stunned me into silence.

"Please, please," he pleaded. "I have to send a name to the Head of State anytime from now. Actually, I am almost late, I don't want to send a name that will be turned down by President Babangida." Initially, Chief Felix Ibru asked me to think over the offer. But suddenly along the line, he told me to send my CV to his office in Asaba, before closing hours the following day. Getting home, I conferred with my wife and immediate family.

We however envisaged one hurdle, would my union release me for this political assignment? OMPADEC would be a full-time concern? I would have to operate from Port Harcourt, the commission's headquarters, which was far from my base. We finally agreed that I should ask for a leave of absence. I immediately

presented the case to the union which after some initial hesitation, had my permission granted. Then, I informed Kingibe of the impending appointment and offered to resign my executive post in SDP. Kingibe however refused to accept my offer. He said I should simply show up for meetings at my convenience.

Shortly afterwards, names of the members of OMPADEC were announced over the air. While I was made the OMPADEC Secretary, Chief Albert Horsfall was appointed as Chairman. Before then, Chief Albert Horsfall was serving in the secret service. General Babangida later in September 1992 inaugurated the commission and its members at Aso Rock. I thereafter reported for duty in our office in Port Harcourt. Before setting out, I had secured the union's permission to use vehicles and other resources in NUPENG's zonal office in Port Harcourt, as OMPADEC had no funds or facilities to work with initially. For office, OMPADEC had the accommodation of its precursor, the Presidential Task Force, to fall back on. Governor Ada George, with his deputy, Dr. Peter Odili, gave me a warm welcome and the government's guest house to lodge in. They gave me one vehicle in addition to the NUPENG vehicle I had obtained.

OMPADEC commissioners came from Nigeria's oil-producing states of Cross River, Imo, Akwa Ibom, Edo, Delta, Rivers, Abia and Ondo. Two members however came from the North. I usually invited all the commissioners whenever we held meetings, as Horsfall was retiring from the intelligence arm of the Presidency and could not resume immediately. Several times, I went to Abuja to hustle for funds, personally funding those trips, including my hotel accommodation in Sheraton and those of civil servants working with me. However, contrary winds soon began to blow in the OMPADEC secretariat and I was on my way out.

I saw the handwriting on the wall as soon as Horsfall resumed. He came with a full complement of SSS agents, who heavily

militarised the whole place with their population that far exceeded the totality of all of us put together. They took over everywhere. I actually tender my displeasure with the situation.

Clearly, Horsfall had a mind to build a personal cult around himself. Commission members had to wait in his Personal Secretary's office for long periods just to have audience with him. As for me, I would just walk into his office, discuss with him and leave. Meanwhile, other board members I met waiting would still remain seated, cringing before this self-made tin-god. It made me uncomfortable, having been used to the trade union atmosphere, where any member of the Executive had the right to enter the general secretary or president's office as and when necessary. Protocols do not constrain the liberty of such a relationship.

Horsfall and I quickly fell apart over office furniture, which we initially agreed to procure by ourselves. Both of us went round the shops in the city and when we could not find anything suitable in Port Harcourt, I offered to procure them in Lagos. We agreed but the next morning, his elder brother, Alfred Horsfall, showed up in my suite and presented himself as a contractor for the furniture. I politely told him we would compare what he had to offer with my Lagos hunt and then take a decision. Apparently, Horsfall felt insulted that I did not give his brother the contract invoice on the spot.

In addition to these personal differences, another thing further put us wide apart. The OMPADEC Decree practically downgraded me to Administrative Secretary/Director General. This was an inglorious degradation for me, the General Secretary of NUPENG, which was one of the most powerful trade unions in Africa. But the oppression graduated beyond this point.

Horsfall one day brought a Judge and insisted we would repeat our oaths of office. This struck me as usurpation of authority, for

President Babangida had himself inaugurated us in Aso Rock at the beginning of the assignment. The Port Harcourt Judge he secured for this new inauguration ended up coming to interpret the OMPADEC decree to us. He particularly emphasised that the “overall boss is the Chairman” and even interpreted the decree as stipulating that I, as the secretary was not a member or commissioner. Then, what was I? A glorified administrative clerk! This was an unexpected development. Before I accepted the job, the Delta State Governor had told me that the two top positions of chairman and the secretary will be shared between the two biggest producer-states. Nothing was said of “Administrative Secretary”, which has now been added in the decree; that is the military for you.

After this “second inauguration,” Governor Ada George invited us over to the Government House for photographs with him. As we assembled ourselves, His Excellency the Governor pulled me to his side, a gesture that Horsfall and his supporters clearly detested, same way president Babangida had done in Aso Rock. But I was no fool. The decree did not give me powers and there was no way I would operate under such a prevailing condition. Maybe I made a mistake in not complaining to IBB, to whom I had access at that time. I suspect that after its makers submitted it for printing, the decree had been doctored, to neutralise the powers of the secretary.

The chairman clearly complicated issues. For one, our backgrounds differed and clashed - pairing a unionist with a secret service boss. While I was thoroughly egalitarian, Horsfall was totally authoritarian and overbearing. As the boss of the Nation’s secret police for so many years, he looked fixated on not having his orders questioned. Thus, my independent spirit really intimidated him. He preferred his usual kowtowing, boot-licking audience. On the other hand, I, leader of a virile mass movement, for the best part of my working life, had grown to become a dye-in-the-wool Democrat. In

unionism where I operated, everybody was a comrade: all animals are equal. With our different outlooks, something was bound to snap between Horsfall and me.

Apart from my personal grind with the Chairman, the tone of the Decree gave some commissioners the excuse to look down on me. This was different from the picture my Governor had painted, which had indicated that the secretary would rank as Number Two man in the set-up. In fact, one commissioner, Junaid Mohammed from Kano, became highly antagonistic of me. He took to insisting that I personally take charge of hotel arrangements (which I had ensured that subordinate staff had perfected well ahead of commissioners' arrival). Junaid wished that I stay at the door to personally welcome them into their rooms, the same man who queered to collect his allowance in my room at the Sheraton in Abuja.

I could not operate in such a soured atmosphere, and so, barely three months after my appointment, I decided to throw in the towel in December 1992. I returned to Lagos and narrated all my experience to my then closest Labour ally, Paschal Bafyau.

"I am resigning and you are the one who will take my resignation letter to the President in Abuja for me. I won't go to Abuja, there is nothing I want to say to him. I am going back to my union. I only took a leave of absence and I have spent only three months of the one year NUPENG gave me." On that note, Paschal traveled to Abuja to submit my letter of resignation to General Babangida. Before then, I had put Governor Ibru in the full picture, urging him to send a more pliant personality, perhaps a civil servant. Expecting Ibru would scold me for losing Delta's slot, I was taken aback by his reply.

"We know the type of person you are, that was why I insisted you should go there. I wanted Delta to get the best, hence, I never wanted to give them a civil servant. In that commission, we wanted someone

who could fight for the dues of Delta without compromising them,” he said, adding with finality, “I will not send any other name.” At my post-resignation meeting with Kingibe and the SDP Exco, I explained things to Kingibe, himself a long-standing civil servant before his SDP chairmanship.

“I knew you could not hold that job. I knew you will come back to us,” he said. That was the end of my OMPADEC foray.

Eighteen

MY TRADE UNION DETENTIONS

I consider myself one of those lucky revolutionaries in this country, having never undergone a dehumanising sort of detention. And yet, I have fought very strong battles. I have taken a lot of risks.

In the course of unionism, I have been arrested many times, but I was hardly detained for a prolonged period, maybe because of the strong union I ran or the loyalty of the oil workers. In most cases, anytime security agents took me away, the news quickly spread. Soon, the whole oil sector would begin to rumble with petroleum workers' anger, which usually made the government panic and eager to embrace the negotiation table. They would then release me immediately. In most of these my detentions, I rarely got into these dirty cells our security agencies specialise in running. A lot of times, they kept me in the office of police or any of the rooms around there; or sometimes it would be at the SSS Headquarters at Awolowo Road, Lagos. They would take me there and question me. Sometimes, they could play some bureaucratic tricks and keep me in their office overnight. Two or three days, that is the highest I have done in Labour matter detention. Thereafter, they could order me to start reporting to their station everyday. That has happened to me many times.

There was one particular detention in 1982 after a strike by Chevron workers who wanted their Human Resources Manager

sacked. The firm panicked. Fortunately or unfortunately, the State Security Service (SSS) has a section specialising in Industrial Relations which they called Labour Desk at that time. These ones specialise on Labour matters and tend to handle industrial issues in a highly constructive way and when they hear of industrial disharmony, they usually talk to Labour leaders with a lot of understanding. Police, on the other hand, neither understand nor handle Labour issues properly. If government alerts them that there is a strike, the police will just come in, smash the place, arrest people, beat them up and brutalise them. That has been the problem we face with the police in Industrial Relations. In most cases, they escalate the problem.

In this Chevron incident, the Human Resources Manager panicked that their operations in Escravos (which was very vital to the country and to their company) were paralysed because of the wild-cat strike action. Instead of going to Ministry of Labour, this manager reported to the police command that the strike was wrong, naming the NUPENG General Secretary and the President as the two culprits, instigating the industrial action. Yet, we two knew nothing about it. I had just closed for the day when Comrade Enas Dubre, my President, and I were picked by the police and taken straight to Alagbon Police Division. There they detained us. It was very late in the day, but we were finally able to get the President of the Nigeria Labour Congress, Alhaji Hassan Sunmonu, and our Lawyer – Mr. Akinlade – who both came to see us at the police station that night.

The following morning, twelve Alagbon policemen took us to the Industrial Arbitration Panel, which had a very good Chairman, Chief Efuaye. (This man NUPENG loved because of his good work. If he was a corrupt judge, he would have made millions, but he retired a very poor Judge. For that, at his old age, we decided to retain him as NUPENG's Legal Consultant. Sometimes, we would not see him for six whole months but we would still remit his fees to him).

Despite the fact that the case involved wealthy multinationals, Chief Efuaye ordered our release. But police rearrested us immediately. Quite shocked, Chief Efuaye said that was his first experience in 12 years as IAP Judge that armed policemen raided his court and forced suspects he had released back into detention. To our hearing, he even phoned the Inspector-General of Police to protest. But then we still ended up being returned to Alagbon.

By then, news had gone round the whole industry and our people started reacting at various sectors, with some stopping work. The authorities saw the signal and finally agreed to a compromise and we were released to go home. Our members returned to work and everything returned to normal. After that incident, whenever police were handling Industrial Relations problems involving NUPENG, I knew they would escalate issues and I preempted things by getting in touch with the highest people in government to intervene, even the Inspector General and the Director General of SSS.

But there was a follow-up to this incident, which was even more humiliating to me. Not long afterwards, I was at home one day when one of my relations came to tell me that my nephew, a young boy on holiday from secondary school, was returning from a cinema when police arrested him and others around 10pm for wandering. The cops took them to Alakara Police Station at Idi-Oro, Lagos, and locked them up for the night. This was at Easter period, Good Friday, 1982. It was a public holiday weekend and all NUPENG staffers had gone on the long break. Confidently, I drove to the small local police station, introduced myself and asked to bail the boy. The Inspector was responsive. He had his men bring me the bail papers which I was filling when the policemen suddenly interrupted me and asked me. "What is your name?" I said, "Frank Kokori."

These cops went in and started speaking to other senior officers. Then they came back with their countenance changed. They said, "Well, well, hold on. Do you know one Enas Dubre?"

I said, “Yes, I know him. He is the President of my union.” They said, “Okay, hold on.”

And they went in again. They returned to tell me I was “one of the most wanted criminals,” and that I was under arrest. Only the Inspector General of Police could say anything about my matter, thus, bail would be ruled out for me. The Alakara officers were so happy, behaving like my arrest (after an alleged almost three months of a nationwide manhunt, as if I was a notorious robber) would fetch them promotions.

They put me in one room and kept me there. Thereafter, they burst into frenzied action, having emergency meetings, phoning some other locations to tell them that they had got the fellow the police had been looking for. I did not understand what was happening. They said they wanted Dubre himself. I told them I did not know the whereabouts of Dubre and that they should allow me return home to alert my people of this new development. They refused. I was completely isolated and equally baffled.

They said only the Inspector General of Police could release me and he was out of town, so I would remain under lock till the Tuesday after Easter Monday!

After one night in this dingy detention, pleading for understanding with no result, I resigned myself to fate. The most annoying part of this was when my brother-in-law, Dr. Sanusi Musa, a medical consultant at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) heard about my predicament and came in to bail me out these Idi-Oro policemen would not budge. They even asked him to go and get a note from the Inspector-General of police, who had already traveled out of Lagos for the holidays. Finally, after spending two nights with them, they began getting signals from police headquarters, ordering them to release me immediately and were told they have made a mistake all along.

After that signal, they now came to their senses and called back Dr. Musa to come and secure my release. Too late, it was time for me “to now show off” a bit. I told them that I was ready to stay with them till after the Easter holidays, to let NUPENG hear of this unmitigated humiliation of their General Secretary. I refused to let Dr. Musa bail me and told them I was ready to stay till Tuesday after Easter.

“My union members should know that their General Secretary has been detained throughout the week for doing nothing, for committing no offence.” It was later realised that the whole thing was a mix-up, which buttresses my point that police complicate Industrial Relations matters. Where had the mix-up come from?

Police had taken the Chevron incident as a major case, dubbed us saboteurs and put our names in signals to all divisions as wanted persons. Our names appeared in police stations nationwide. When the case was disposed of, our names remained in some of these stations (like Alakara). Hence, these small officers became excited that they had caught a big fish that would fetch them promotion. That was why they held me.

Quickly, the DPO started begging me to go home. When my in-law also joined in the pleading, I yielded and returned home. Friends advised me to take the police to court and sue them for damages. All my life, I have never sued anybody for whatever reason. I cannot undergo the long litigations. And so, the police got away with that assault, as I chose to simply lick my wounds.

But I took such harassments as part of the hazards of being NUPENG General Secretary. As NUPENG General Secretary, I worked so much: you would see me drafting memorandum, letters and everything. I worked more than even lawyers, very successful lawyers. Lawyers would make millions doing the job I do. Despite the way I worked so hard to represent oil workers in industrial

courts and at arbitration panels, I never gained much in material acquisitions. But still, I found satisfaction in what I was doing. My satisfaction came from an unfathomable depth. I knew what I was doing. I was not just a trader that, if anything happens to, no one would hear about. NUPENG made me prominent, such that if anything happened to me (even till today), it becomes a public issue. If I died in the Labour struggle, I knew I would become a hero and get some great recognition. Such a realisation excited me so much that taking risks meant nothing to me. I could make sacrifices. I could go to prison because my members were outside. Mandela was in prison for almost 27 years. That whole time, his name went round the world. What honour could be greater than that? No amount of money can buy such fame. These are the things that I cherish.

And that was why I cherished my life in NUPENG. As an ordinary person, you could get locked up and people will hear nothing about you. You mean nothing to them; an insignificant statistic. I would not like to go through life like that.

Nineteen

POST-JUNE 12 BLUES

I never intended to leave Bama Prison and work for long in NUPENG. I felt there was nothing left for me in trade unionism. All my adult life, I have been a real career unionist. I had done my best for the union and for Labour generally. After June 12, there were simply no battles left for me to fight. Involving in a Labour struggle after June 12 would be an anti-climax. After four years in prison for leading contemporary Nigeria's biggest political revolt against a most predatory Military junta, would I now begin to lead workers on strikes for salary increases in Mobil, Texaco or Schlumberger? No way!

An incident will illustrate. Adams Oshiomhole began mobilising Labour in 1999 to protest the huge "furniture allowances" that the National Assembly members had allocated to themselves. He told me I would be one of the main speakers at the protest.

I felt I had seen it all and I must leave when the ovation was loudest. The union would accord me my due – a most befitting send-off for its longest-serving General Secretary.

I smiled at him and said, "Adams, leave me out of this. After all the whole experience I had, you want me to still be going to march the whole streets of Abuja on furniture allowance being paid to the National Assembly. *Please, I no go fit come. Make una handle this one.*"

That was my thinking before and after I stepped out of Bama Prison in 1998. However, I had no intention of retiring to any farm. For as far as I could see, I had an assignment lined up for me. The President-elect would surely find me useful somewhere as soon as he regained his mandate. Thus, I was thinking of higher service. Nothing in my wildest imagination told me that Abiola would die in prison.

Nothing would have stopped me from being part of Abiola's national government, so I thought all the while I was in incarceration. As a result, although frail and weak upon my release from incarceration, I immediately began working on some executive papers for the Government of National Unity (GNU) that I hoped to present to the President-elect. The idea of a GNU, headed by Abiola, was by then popular and it looked like the most realistic scenario in view of developments that had transpired since the struggle for June 12 – Kingibe's turncoating, the elimination of the political structures, and the passage of time. That MKO never left incarceration alive was devastating for me.

The day MKO died, I was at home in Lagos. The Abacha-appointed Administrator still minded NUPENG, so I could not resume. A stream of visitors, admirers and well wishers flowed unabated to my home to see me, to hear me, to feel me and to identify with my travails. I was looking 20 years older than my age and I felt terribly sick, so sometimes I would retreat from these unending visits to my bedroom on the top floor. That was where I was that day when suddenly, one of my children dashed upstairs, shouting, "Daddy, Daddy they say Abiola has died!"

Terribly shocked, I quickly turned on both the radio and the TV, at once. I screamed, "What is happening? What is happening?" Phone calls immediately began pouring in. It was true. The symbol and embodiment of June 12 was dead. It devastated me; really,

really devastated me. I had been released with the first batch of nine freed political detainees that comprised; Comrade Milton Dabibi (of PENGASSAN), retired General Olusegun Obasanjo, Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti (Human Rights Activist), Mrs. Chris Anyanwu (Publisher of TSM Magazine) Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki (deposed Sultan of Sokoto), Chief Olabiyi Durojaiye (a NADECO chieftain), Uwen Udo, Chief Bola Ige (NADECO chieftain and former Governor of Oyo State) and myself.

Everybody thought MKO would be released with the second stream. That did not happen. When the third batch came and that still excluded him, we thought perhaps the delay had to do with negotiations between him and the powers-that-be; and that Nigeria's own Mandela would sooner than later emerge from prison to palace. Then suddenly, they announced his death. Before you knew it, his corpse was in Lagos. Lagos and the entire West went mad, unleashing an orgy of riots, arsons and killings. Abiola's death killed my hope and deflated me. I lost interest in virtually everything.

MKO's Last Meetings

First was his meeting with the UN Secretary General, Kofi Anan and Emeka Anyaoku, Secretary General of the Commonwealth of Nations. The proceedings of that meeting was one of the most amazing diplomatic flip flop of that period. There was also the US delegation just before his death, led by under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering; US Secretary of State for African Affairs – Ms. Susan Rice and Ambassador William Twaddell, then U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria.

Kofi Anan and Emeka Anyaoku

- What was these that made impossible for these two well respected international civil servants. One; the leader of the world's biggest assembly, and the other; the head of the influential Commonwealth of Nations; both Africans of West African origin.

- Was it fear for self-preservation? No, it can't be that. Was it greed for easy money? This is also difficult to access. For these two Africans, who were Secretary General of the United Nations and the Commonwealth respectively, meeting for the first time with an enshakled Abiola; a man who won a properly contested presidential election in Nigeria after five years, and not being strong enough to talk to the Nigerian military about their transgression, but instead reverting to coercing a helpless prisoner to forgo his presidential mandate spoke volume of the visit of these two international personalities of African descent.

- Where these two men talking for Nigerians or they were working for the Nigerian military who have then become enemies of the people. Were they testing the waters for the Nigerian junta? That is another story for historians

I remained long enough in Nigeria to help bury Abiola. Thereafter, I flew out of the country for my medical treatment abroad. I had offers for an all-expense paid medical care, based on international solidarity from Dutch Federation of Trade Unions, Norwegian Federation, American Federation and many others from across the globe. Because the American Federation, strongly urged me to come and pick my award, the George Meany Human Rights Award for the most outstanding Trade Unionist in the world for 1996 - and receive medical treatment, I thought it better to kill three birds with one stone by picking the American offer, since going to the US would afford me the opportunity to see my children too.

I went to the US and received my award. At the impressive ceremony, I could not but remember Leon Jouhaux (1879-1954) Secretary-General of the trade union in France, the Confederation Generale Des Travail (CGT, General Confederation of Labour) who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1951, after being imprisoned in a concentration camp by the Nazis that occupied France in the Second World War. I could find a parallel in him.

Thereafter, the American Federation lined up for me a super-medical treatment fit for a king. Various consultants worked on me, including a wealthy Neuro-Surgeon, reputed to consult for the Saudi Royal family. They put me through the MRI machine, X-rays, fluid sampling, skin sampling; the whole works.

My trip to the US proved to be the calm before the storm. I returned to the country and got engaged in a brand new battle, this time within NUPENG.

The Post-June 12 NUPENG NEC

The post-June 12 Executive Council under the presidency of Brisibe Awe appeared bent on removing me. However, they were also sensitive to public opinion which weighed heavily in my favour. Frank Ovie Kokori was popular. And anyone would think twice before counting himself on the side of his enemies. I had the Press too on my side. Once, one evening newspaper went to town with the banner headline, “Kokori Shot in the Hip” that brought a stampede of well-wishers to my house. People had taken the statement literally. They thought that gunmen had indeed attacked me. However, the news item accurately captured the dirty conspiracy to remove me from the union. The Press quickly branded the Executive, “Abacha Boys.”

I quelled the plot when the boys first moved the motion at the Presidential Hotel, Port Harcourt, during a Brisibe Awe-arranged

NEC meeting. As soon as they raised the motion, I walked out of the meeting and my deputies in the National Secretariat followed me. It was a method we had once used when many years back, the NEC under Late Comrade U.M. Okoro (who later became PENGASSAN President and died in the 2005 Sosoliso air crash in Port Harcourt) tried in Kaduna to unilaterally retire three Assistant General Secretaries without prior discussions with the National Secretariat. We had walked out and the Okoro-led National Executive quickly dropped the move.

And what was my offence? Nothing. My adversaries could not level any charges against me. Privately they told people, “Kokori has become a Mandela. He is too big for us to control. Let him retire.” Similar insinuations had been made against me when I took up the membership of the Constituent Assembly in 1989. Then the NEC held a Kangaroo session and suspended me on the premise that the national assignment kept me away from office. But they had as real reason my being too protective of the Union funds as the chief accounting officer of the union. The reason is this; the constitution stipulates that the president and other elected officers of the union should do their job on honorary basis, since they still do their full time job with their employer. But there was this habit of elected officials of the union travelling from their station in Port Harcourt, Warri, Kaduna, etc., to the Secretariat in Lagos for various untenable reasons, asking for allowances which the union could still afford then. As I was checking and quering such frivolous trips which were not authorized by the union, I never knew I was unknowingly incurring the anger of my Comrades. But what could I do? Some of these visits are purely private. Yet, they will want the union to fund them. That was my predicament. If even the President or Treasurer came to the National Secretariat without notice, I will refuse to pay for such visits.

I would say, “Why are you here? What is your mission? Who invited you here? We are not going to pay your bills. Just go back to your station immediately.”

Unknown to me, such control did not go down well with most of my executives, even though I behaved that way because of the need to preserve the union’s scarce funds. I never knew these people were getting really mad at me, feeling threatened at my being too “powerful”. When I look back now, I realize that I overprotected the union fund to a fault.

However, they could never accuse me of selling out. Nor could they accuse me of financial impropriety. The General Secretary does not sign cheques in NUPENG. The union operates bank accounts in its four operational zones, Port Harcourt, Warri, Lagos and Kaduna. Signatories to those accounts are the President, the Treasurer and one of the three trustees. However, every voucher has to be signed by the GS, serving as a form of control. As General Secretary, I was usually frugal with resources and I ensured that I checked profligacy amongst the leadership. Naturally, that did not win me many friends.

With me being insulated from the union’s bank accounts, no one could level charges of corruption against me. That helped me because in most organisations, troubles and accusations usually break out primarily over financial mismanagement. As for selling out, they themselves knew I harboured no such trait. Throughout my years on the GS seat, I blatantly refused to do private business with the oil industry. Thus, workers in the oil industry had 100 percent confidence in me. My credo in the union had always been “I will not make money on this seat. I will start making money when I must have left this seat.” This was the basis of my not having anything material to show for all my years with the Labour movement.

However, when the NUPENG President, supported by one or two key officers, floats an issue, then, other executives will likely swing his way because he controls the purse. However, I had been able to neutralise this influence in the past. But then I had always had the Secretariat fully behind me. This time, unfortunately, I perceived that the Secretariat had been compromised and infiltrated by black sheep.

Palace coups were always being planned. But my ears were ever to the ground throughout the zones. So before any plot matured, I would hear about it and puncture it. But this time was different. Maybe prison had kept me away for too long and dulled my Intelligence network. Or perhaps I had lost the interest to fight for anything within the union. After all, what remained for me in the union?

Anyhow, I had already told my deputies that I would be leaving by the next conference in 2001. After I quelled that May plot, the National Executive sent a letter, announcing an emergency NEC meeting in July. It was unusual. The GS would normally call such a NEC meeting; and this would be after reaching a consensus with the President on agenda, venue and other issues. The meeting held at Airport Hotel, Lagos. Carefully planned, somebody was to move a motion for my retirement. Another person would second the motion. Then the house would put the motion to a vote and my retirement would be sealed.

However, by this time, I had fully regained my elements and my Intelligence network had intimated me with the full plot. In fact, the tanker drivers called me to Benin and asked me to give them the go-ahead to fight whenever my retirement was announced. This was crucial support. For everyone knew that I had built the tanker drivers into a fighting machine of the union and when they strike, the effect is felt immediately. So I cherished their support. Other

branches too met with me over the matter. However, I told them that if the motion came up again I would not allow the matter of my retirement to degenerate into a crisis. I would not destroy a house I had built with my own hands

My real annoyance was with Akinlaja and Okougbo, my two deputies. They had been with me, especially Akinlaja, since 1975, before the restructuring of the trade unions. We fought battles together, suffered defeat together, won battles together, did everything together. Our families were one. As struggling unionists, we slept together on the same bed. He knows my family home in Warri. I followed him to his people in Ondo. Any training I participated in anywhere in the world, Akinlaja would go as soon as I returned. Okougbo came in 1979 when the union was just taking off, from his job as an Industrial Relations Officer with the Nigerian Airways. To see him employed, I had stuck out my neck in the interview panel that tested him. Armed with his diploma in Industrial Relations from my Alma Mater, University of Ibadan, Okougbo had entered the interview venue that day.

One panelist greeted him: "Good morning."

"Good day," he replied.

When other interviewers chipped in that he should have responded in like manner since it was still morning. Okougbo insisted on being correct. This triggered off a serious argument between him and the interviewers, many of whom for this reason felt irritated and ruled him out. But I argued that we were running a union that would always fight managements and we would not achieve anything stocking our ranks with "robots" and "yes men." And that was how I influenced the NUPENG President, Deputy President and General Secretary to appoint Okougbo.

And here I was in the battle of my "life" in 1999 and none of these my deputies could back me up. I had told them in Port

Harcourt, “If you allow them get away with this, I have nothing to lose. It will be your loss. I was not even supposed to come back to this seat after my detention in Bama. I have made my mark, I have made my name. My name opens doors for me wherever I go today. The fight is for you, not for me. This union is your inheritance. Once I am humiliated out of this place you people are finished; you will become servants.”

Around that time, Vanguard Newspaper published a story written by its ace Labour Editor, Funmi Komolafe, and my accusers accused me of leaking the information. And that formed the peg of their accusation at the Airport Hotel meeting, that I had instigated the Press to write positive stories about me and negative stories about them. As if I controlled the Nigerian media.

I had a few supporters in the Executive, primarily from the North, but I did not want to expose them to the ire of their colleagues. The people I wanted to fight the battle were Akinlaja and Okouhgo, whose ability to puncture the plot I knew very well. Why they abandoned me, I don’t know to this day. Maybe it was all part of the power game.

At the venue, the President, Brisibe Awe, made the opening remarks, welcoming everybody. The agenda was read afterwards.

I raised my hand: “Mr. President, please, I have an observation.”

Awe began to tell me to hold on for him to finish his opening remarks. I interrupted him again and this forced him to stop. Seeing I had the floor, I began a valedictory speech on how I started life with the union. The struggles we had fought. How the union became my life. I spoke of the way I built the union, and how the union had built me too; for without the union, my name would not have been the household name that it had become. I skimmed through all the travails I suffered for the union. I went to prison. I went to several detentions, culminating in the Abacha detention. I recalled how

anytime NUPENG ran into problem, as GS I bore the brunt and lost my position. Rarely did presidents pay any price of detention. And compared to mine, those were really shorter detentions.

“A great leader knows when to bow out – when the ovation is loudest. A time to be born and a time to die, and the way it is to me, the ovation is at its peak and I will bow out. But one thing I want to warn, I will bow out at my own time. But it won’t be long. This is now the beginning of July, I will bow out in December. I need six months to bow out. Six months. But if the period of six months is not kept, there will be trouble. Then I will run a parallel union. Then we will now know who owns the house.”

Thus, I ended my valedictory speech.

My move had given them the easy way out. All along they had feared public opinion. How would they explain to the world why they so summarily dismissed a man who did so much for the union and the Nation? They were afraid of factionalisation, for as in the 1970s and 1980s, I could retreat to the trenches and divide the union once more. And where would they find the time, full-time employees that they were, to fight a veteran Labour warlord like me? By proposing to retire, I had given them great relief. Exco members jumped up in acclamation. Their claps tore through the hall. Clapping. Clapping. Clapping. Then one after the other, they began to release encomiums upon me like rain.

A great man.

A great General Secretary.

A hero.

A patriot.

The President finally rounded off: “Now we are going to give the biggest send-off that the country has ever seen to our great General Secretary.”

On the spot, they set up a committee of the whole house to plan the event. All the union branches tasked themselves financially. They approached the oil companies and got donations. Finally, my send-off held at the National Theatre. I felt really proud. They really made it a big event. Every branch of NUPENG came. Relevant agencies and organisations put in their presence. The diplomatic corps; industrial unions; Labour agencies from around the world; two governors: Bola Tinubu (Lagos) and Segun Osoba (Ogun); Lagos Deputy Governor Kofoworola Akerele-Bucknor; Speakers of State Houses of Assembly; legislators from both the National Assembly and the State Assemblies; Delta State Government representatives; the Press; managements of oil firms; local and international foundations; and labour solidarity. The hall filled up to capacity, spilling over an even greater hoard of well-wishers and admirers to the adjoining field. I had a really glorious exit. It made me appreciate that I bowed out at the time I bowed out.

Today, when I go to NUPENG, the union would receive me like a king. If they were holding a meeting, the meeting stopped. The President, the General Secretary, the Deputy General Secretary and every Assistant General Secretary, the receptionist, the gateman; they would all leave whatever they were doing and would receive me with so much respect.

This makes me happy that I left NUPENG peacefully after 22 years.

Twenty

HOW THE PRO-DEMOCRACY ACTIVISTS MISCALCULATED

June 12 warriors should squarely take the blame for their own disappearance from the commanding heights of the present democratic dispensation. Even though it was entirely their fault, they find it difficult to accept the bitter truth.

Speaking for myself now, I should have won myself some relevance just as I did in the SDP days; because I had the opportunity to meet the last Military Head of State, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, on many occasions. But I guess my disillusionment over the shocking death of Bashorun Abiola paralysed my better judgement. It remains a mystery to me and everybody close to me, why I did not secure Delta State for myself.

Perhaps too, I was over-confident that the incoming civilian Head of State would nominate me for a federal appointment, since I always had my sight set on being useful for the whole country.

After I was released from prison, I went to the village to honour a welcome reception arranged for me by my Ovu Community in Delta State. While away, Chief Olusegun Osoba visited my home in Lagos. And meeting my absence, he left a message that I should get in touch with him immediately. This was July 1998, barely two weeks after my release. I got the message when I returned to Lagos and I called his line. When he came over to my place, he told me that General Abdulsalami wanted to see me urgently.

This surprised me because I had no previous dealings whatsoever with the General, but I guess his wife influenced the invitation. Justice (Mrs.) Fati Abubakar and I had served together in the Constitution Review Committee of 1987 where she was representing Niger State as its Solicitor General and I was representing Labour. We served together on the Committee for over a year and later found ourselves working together again in the Constituent Assembly.

I flew to Abuja for the 10pm appointment at Aso Rock. As I was entering the crowded premises with my wife, I heard somebody say: "That is Chief Kokori; that must be Chief Kokori." An urbane, handsome young man then came towards me and we shook hands. "Who are you?" I asked. He introduced himself as Brigadier Buba Marwa, the Military Administrator of Lagos State. "It is a pleasure meeting you," I said, and moved on to meet the Head of State. Marwa later honoured NUPENG's invitation to its conference in November, when a substantive National Executive Council was elected to take over from the military-appointed administrator. Marwa came as 'Host Governor and Chief Guest of Honour.' As we sat next to each other, he quietly asked whether I had a house. I replied in the affirmative. He just smiled and shook his head. He was a pleasant fellow with a heart of gold, for no other person had ever raised that matter with me, not even my friends in government.

Back to my meeting with General Abdulsalami, it was past midnight when the Head of State finally saw me. Esther went with Justice Fati to another section of the complex while the Head of State and I went to another part of Aso Rock. The place was not new to me. In fact, I had visited almost all the Heads of State in the Presidential Villa, only Shonekan I met in State House, Marina, Lagos. General Abdulsalami apologised to me that the country had not been fair to me. According to him, during the period of my long incarceration, his wife indeed persuaded him to convince Abacha

to release me. She said she knew me very well from our days at the CRC and the CA; and that although militant and radical, I was not a bad man.

I met the General three times in Aso Rock at his own invitation. At all our meetings, General Abdulsalami told me point blank that he would relinquish power very soon. In fact, he met my ideal of how brief a military regime should be. Somewhere in my prison notes, I recorded this about “The Army and the People.”

If a patriotic and nationalist army is to intervene at all under a corrupt and anti-people government, it should be very brief i.e. come in as an impartial umpire and conduct free and fair elections with the support of other interest and professional groups, and return to the barracks within six months. The area of probing the sins of the sacked regime should be left to the incoming Parliament to conduct.

If everybody is honest in this, democracy will sooner bloom in these developing countries like it is today in the developed countries of the West. For now, the military in the Third World countries have not lived up to the expectation of the people. They are traditionally not equipped to perform better.

One of the ironies of the Nigerian military usurpation of power is that, this army has not evolved from a nationalist people's resistance army, neither has it developed from a “freedom fighter's patriotic army.” On the other hand, this is a conservative colonial-trained army, inherited by an independent Nigeria.

They never fought any battle with a ruthless imperialist power with all its hazards and privations. Instead, we are saddled with an elitist trained officer corps, spoon-fed from the military school, through a well-ordered Defence College. So what do we expect?

Everytime we met , Abdulsalami remained open and kind to me. His sincere tone and the high esteem in which he seemed to hold me did not ebb on those three occasions. That being the case, what would have stopped me making demands on a man who seemed eager to right the wrongs his class had done me?

When I told him I would be going for medical check-up abroad, he asked me whether I needed any assistance in that direction. I told him everything had been taken care of by the international Labour solidarity, so I needed nothing. And that was true, for my sponsors had made arrangements for me in the best hospital, Georgetown University Medical Centre, the same place where American presidents do their medical check-ups. When I made this clear to General Abdulsalami, he simply shook his head, thinking I am sure, “This man is a wonderful man, he does not even want anything from government”.

Then he told me that should I still want any assistance, I should not fail to reach him. That was an open cheque from the most powerful man in the land and I could have used it to secure anything suiting my fancy. With such a relationship between General Abdulsalami and me, if I had gone ahead to join a party and fight for a position, I most likely would have succeeded. But I decided to wait for a public position from the incoming President. And I had tangible basis to hope for such an appointment. For upon my returning from medical treatment in America, I held interactions with Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in his Ota Farm. I have also severally met him in Aso Rock since he became President, privately.

At the begining of this Fourth Republic, Abdulsalami’s wife lost her father. I paid the family a sympathy visit in their Minna country home and the General still asked me: “Are you close to the President? Or would you want me to put in a word on your behalf?

“Oh no,” I said. “Do not bother at all, Sir. President Obasanjo knows me very well. We are close.”

And that was the truth. I talked with the President one on one. Upon our release from prison, Obasanjo sent people to call me. He too went to prison. When we came out of prison, our relationship continued as before. We started working together again. He would usually call me and I would go to his farm for discussions. Yes, we reminisced about our sufferings in the hands of Abacha, but our interactions went deeper than that, delving into strategy on how to improve the Nation.

After he came to power on 29th May, 1999, President Obasanjo invited me.

“Sir, His Excellency, President Olusegun Obasanjo, is inviting you to celebrate the first anniversary of your release from prison on the 16th of June”, the presidential aide told me on phone. ‘And he wants you to furnish him with the phone numbers of some of your colleagues.’ These “colleagues” were erstwhile political detainees. One of them was former TSM Publisher, Mrs. Chris Anyanwu. Assuming he had already received his own invitation, I called Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti and got Chris Anyanwu’s number from him. Then I made perfunctory reference to the President’s planned get-together; but when I sensed he appeared to be in the dark about it, I quickly dropped the subject. Thereafter I forwarded Anyanwu’s number back to the Presidency. This was June 14th, and we were billed to hold the event on 16th June. Suddenly, on the 15th, the presidential aide called to tell me the event had been cancelled as the President had to leave for South Africa to witness Mandela’s handing over to Thabo Mbeki, the new South African President.

Could I have been closer to President Obasanjo than that? With such a relationship with Obasanjo, why did I need General Abdulsalami as an intermediary?

Now, let me return to my colleagues. Those in the human rights and pro-democracy movement failed to form a formidable party, and so could not win elections. They should have learnt that lesson from the SDP days when Labour's poor purse prevented it from making much impact in politics. Nigerian politics is money. Politics here rarely plays out as in the developed world where policies, issues and principles rule.

Which living Nigerian is more principled than Gani Fawehinmi? Yet, was it not this same Gani Fawehinmi who contested elections in 2003 and could not get enough votes in his residential ward in Ikeja? He discovered he had woken up too late! Rival politicians manipulated him out of reckoning. The masses would speak laudably of him and his fight for human rights principles and yet refuse to vote for him right under his nose.

Why? Of course, they liked him, but they could not stand his idealistic approach to politics that would not let him and his type part with money. Voters will want you to give them money because there is pervading poverty. The people are just too poor! That is what I experienced firsthand. You call a meeting in the village and 200 people gather to honour your invitation. If you do not give them money to transport them back to their destination, the next time you call them they will not turn up. They must go home with at least, ₦500 cash. That does not amount to bribery. That take-away cash purely goes into transporting them to your place and back to their houses. And in addition, you have to serve them refreshment. If you do not have that type of money, what business do you have playing politics? And such expenses are still the barest minimum.

Civil society people rarely have that type of money, but professional politicians make adequate provisions for it—and more. Then it became worse after their first term. They have since accumulated so much money that you cannot even stand them.

Today, relatively, we in the civil society are more pauperised, while our opponents in power have become obscenely rich that we cannot match them. They command the commanding heights of government, which today in Nigeria, has become the biggest business.

That apart, the pro-democrats also had disagreements amongst themselves over the Abdulsalami transition. Some flew the banner of boycott, while some campaigned for participation. Some believed the military was not serious and reliable, when some among them begged to give the process a chance.

At the onset of the General Abdulsalami transition in 1998, the civil society chiefs wanted the operating documents to be prim and proper or they would not touch the programme with a mile-long pole. They complained about everything—from the proposed Nigerian Constitution, to the voters' register, to guidelines governing the elections, to the timing of polls. Nothing looked right enough to inform their participation.

I felt differently, even as a revolutionary. The great Gani thrives in the law courts. Quite different from the thinking of some of my colleagues, my attitude was that the military must leave governance by all means and I earnestly canvassed this position at every opportunity available to me at private meetings and public forums. And then what if soldiers had bought the “anti-transition” idea and decided to stay for more years, stating as excuse the need for more time to fashion out an “acceptable” Constitution? How does that promote democracy?

But the June 12 clan branded as traitors, whoever among them that participated in the elections. Principles, yes, but who is there today who can lay claim to greater principles than people like us? And then, what are principles without the power to sustain them?

I recall the NUPENG crisis of the 1980s when between them the rival factions had 14 suits in the law courts, cases that would never have been decided in my life time. I had to resort to a raw show of strength that quickly quenched the cases and brought the real faction on the ground to the ascendancy of the union till today. I needed the military to help prove that point, and I used the military.

That was why I said if the military wanted to hand over, we should prepare to take over, even if the process looked half-baked. The military should leave anyhow, anyway. Thereafter, civilians can rally round to perfect the system. But some pro-democrats insisted soldiers should stay and fashion out a befitting Constitution—even after General Abdulsalami indicated he had no interest lingering in power!

Personally, I felt we should contest. In fact, when I went to the US, I stayed in a very good hotel, The Governor's House. All the exiles were still there in the US, scattered all over America and Europe and many visited my hotel suite. But they also came together to receive me. The *Egbe Omo Yoruba* hosted me to a big reception, chaired by Pa Enahoro with Professor Gbadegesin, Professor Aluko and other active Yorubas in the Diaspora were all present. They were always talking of boycotting the blossoming transition. It was the main feature of their discuss.

I related to them what General Abdulsalami had privately told me at Aso Rock; how he told me point blank that he was leaving power and would not be lingering in office. Although I made Abdulsalami's position clear to my compatriots in the civil society movement and to the exiles in the US, they simply chose not to listen. These leaders, except Senator Bola Tinubu, wanted the pro-June 12 family to boycott the unfolding transition.

Tinubu wanted to return to Nigeria to contest the elections, but he would not want to be seen to be swimming against the collective

decision of pro-democracy activists there in the US. Whenever Tinubu came to see me at The Governor's House, we took time to talk.

"Frank, how is this thing back home?"

I told him, "Tinubu, look, most of these people you have here do not understand much about a revolution! In any revolution, you must have a political base. The base is that you secure a constituency in the election. Like this South-West now, if we can't secure it, we can't fight any battle and win in the future."

"That exactly is what I think," he replied. "But these people keep saying boycott, boycott."

"No," I said. "In your mind, whom do you think Lagos will sponsor?"

By then he had not told me he wanted to go for the governorship, so I calculated that he might want to return to his seat in the Senate. But much later, he confided in me his governorship ambition.

"Then go home!" I counseled.

"I will come," he said. "I will come."

And he had the wherewithal to contest competitively. In the US, Tinubu had a petrol station—if not more. Some of the exiles knew it and pointed it out to me. It carries a Shell Logo. Being a fuel dealer, Tinubu was not a hungry man in the US. He was doing well and he used to help many of the exiles. Even with all my expenses paid in the US, including my expensive medical bills by my host – American Federation of Labour/Congress of Industrial Organisation (AFL/CIO), Tinubu still gave money to me and Dabibi. Without us asking, he once gave us \$1,000 each. Throughout my stay in the US, from July to August 1998, Tinubu and I held meetings regularly in my hotel suite and we kept brainstorming and agreed on the need for those in the struggle to get into government.

Then I would also meet Chief Enahoro in his apartment. Back home, the impression people had was that in exile, Chief Enahoro would be living like a king in a big mansion with servants and royal facilities at his beck and call. He indeed deserved such opulence, being a septuagenarian who had sacrificed very much for this country, especially when the democrats, led by Bill Clinton, were then in power. But lo and behold, in exile, Pa Enahoro, with his loyal wife, stayed in a two-bedroom flat in an apartment building. Books were strewn all over the place. With the zeal that saw him as an arrowhead of the anti-colonial struggle, the old man was still sweating out strategies to free his country from the shackles of military neo-colonialists. In the US, he did not even have a car to his name. Whenever he wanted to go out, he would call the likes of youthful Lanre Banjo (he later contested Ogun State governorship elections on the platform of the National Conscience Party. NCP, against Otunba Gbenga Daniel) who would usually chauffeur the old man in their own car to wherever he had an appointment to keep. At that age, Pa Enahoro, with the likes of Wole Soyinka, Alani Akinrinade, Dan Suleiman, made the pro-democracy forums tick. When people heard his name, they listened.

But Enahoro made a mistake. When I went to America, I told him. “Please, Sir, let us go back. The whole Bendel—Delta and Edo—if we go back and our people see us walking together; me walking behind you, we will make an impact.”

“No,” he said. “I am not coming.” And he will add “the military are not leaving, let us not waste our time.”

Late 1998, I was in Lagos when Afikuyomi phoned from abroad that the exiles would visit my place on their arrival in Nigeria. From the Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos, they headed straight for the Ikeja home of Late Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola. The team was led by Air Vice Marshal Dan Suleiman, and included

John Odigie-Oyegun, Bola Tinubu, Peter Obadan and Tokunbo Afikuyomi. Thereafter, they came directly to my place. I had a small crowd of former SDP stalwarts waiting for them, and we gave the returnees a warm welcome reception.

Suleiman took one look at my residence and quipped: “Didn’t they say Kokori ate a lot of money from Abiola? Then, how come he lives in this kind of modest house?”

We regaled one another with such jokes and light-hearted banters. Afterwards, we dismissed the crowd and retreated into my living quarters upstairs, where we spent the whole day in deep conversation.

I told them they had returned to the country a bit late, especially those from the old Bendel axis —Oyegun and Obadan. I recalled that when I came to US, I had pleaded with Pa Enahoro to return home around July. If my entreaties had succeeded back then, we in the struggle would have been able to make impact politically. But by this time, the founders of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) —Samuel Ogbemudia, Gabriel Igbiniedion and Tony Anenih— had taken over and it would be a herculean task for the likes of Oyegun and Obadan to upstage them; especially then that preparations for primaries had reached top gear.

“However, Tinubu, you don’t have problems, just fight for your primaries. Afikuyomi, you too have no problem, just fight for your primaries. The Alliance for Democracy (AD) will sweep the South-West because Afenifere that influenced the founding of AD is in control of the entire Yoruba West and they will win here,” I said.

The following day, they came to see me once more and we continued our discussions on the unfolding politics.

Time and the subsequent events proved right my predictions. Tinubu and Afikuyomi won under the banner of AD as Governor and Senator respectively, while Oyegun and Obadan could not consummate their aspirations in Edo State.

Later in the course of the Fourth Republic, Pa Enahoro returned from exile to the country. He came home to a rousing welcome in Lagos and the city was brought to a standstill: because of the mammoth crowd, movement from the airport to Lagos Island lasted several gruesome hours, instead of about 30 minutes. I was one of the speakers lined up at the welcome rally organised for him at the capacity-filled Onikan Stadium, Lagos.

“What I told Pa Enahoro in America has today come to pass,” I said publicly. “Revolutionaries must have a base. We just don’t boycott and boycott the political process. If Tinubu does not reign in Lagos today, we would not have been able to give Pa Enahoro this kind of rousing welcome. But this fantastic welcome is possible because of the logistics provided by the Lagos State Government under Tinubu.”

Of course, Enahoro did not get that kind of rousing welcome in his home, Edo State, where non-June 12 interests had taken command.

Like Gani Fawehinmi, Pa Enahoro forgot that revolutionaries must have a base. It was a lesson they learnt too late. In African struggles, this is a lesson we always learn too late. Such people as Gani Fawehinmi and Pa Enahoro were born ahead of their time in a wrong country. They would have been better off born in Europe, where you talk to decent people, where principles are principles; where honour is honour.

Twenty One

MY OWN HONOURS ROLL

South Africa

South Africa was just emerging from the chains of Apartheid, but she plunged really neck-deep into the June 12 struggle and became the only African Nation that stood out for freedom and democracy. I give kudos to Dr. Nelson Mandela and his team who did their best to conscientise the world against Abacha. If you talk about the resolutions that the Commonwealth passed on Nigeria, people like Mandela did the job. They visited Nigeria so many times, trying to talk to the deaf and dumb regime. Maybe because of their own history, they felt that no country should suffer what they suffered. Their leader received insults from Nigerian miscreants, disguising as statesmen and diplomats. But Mandela stood his ground. I give kudos and honour to South Africa and their great Leader, The Madiba.

Canada

The Canadians did their best. Canada actually broke diplomatic relations with Nigeria and closed down her Embassy here in Nigeria. Canada harboured many NADECO and other political exiles and at every forum worldwide, kept criticising Nigeria. They remained our consistent friend.

USSR

USSR had been balkanised before the June 12 struggle, with each unit trying to survive on its own, therefore no one really expected anything from them. In the days of a strong USSR, I know what they did to promote freedom in Third World countries. They gave colossal assistance to the African National Congress's fight to win democracy in South Africa. They did the same for MPLA in Angola, FRELIMO in Mozambique and SWAPO in Namibia. Unfortunately, during our own travail, USSR was no more.

America

The USA is termed the watchdog of democracy and the policeman of the world on human rights. But with regards to June 12, US disappointed. That Nation failed to reflect the fire of its individual citizens, like Ambassador Walter Carrington, who stood to be counted on the side of pro-democrats battling the Abacha regime. It becomes more puzzling when we recall that Bill Clinton led a Democrats government during that period. We felt Clinton should have told Abacha point-blank to pack and go. But US appeared too weak, and seemed more concerned protecting American interests. That was why Abacha was able to ride roughshod over Nigerians for so long, breaching all aspects of human rights. And Nigerians were ready to fight. It is easier when the people are ready to fight and a foreign power gives them assistance. But Clinton failed Nigerians at that crucial period. Look at what US did in Afghanistan, Iraq and Liberia. The Americans invaded Iraq, even against world opinion, launched a military expedition until Saddam Hussein fell. In Nigeria, world opinion weighed against the sitting dictator, but US failed Nigerians in the hour of need. Even the American Congress's Black Caucus failed us immensely, considering that M.K.O. Abiola contributed immensely to the growth of that body.

Britain

Britain was a failure too. They talked and talked without putting up a robust fight against Abacha. Britain succeeded in passing motions at Commonwealth and UN levels, leading to the Commonwealth expelling Nigeria. But with dictators, motions are meaningless—motions without action. If the developed nations only passed motions against Afghanistan and the Apartheid regime in South Africa, those evil regimes would have remained till today, but the super powers supported the liberation efforts in those countries with finances and arms. Britain gave us no such backing.

The Vatican

At a stage, MKO, even though a Muslim, expressly commended the Christian world, especially the Nigerians, for its unalloyed condemnation of the political wrongs being perpetrated in Nigeria. In March 1998, the worldwide leader of the Church, Late Pope John Paul, visited Nigeria and met General Abacha in Aso Rock. The Pontiff asked for the release of political detainees and actually submitted a list of those to be unchained, including Abiola, Dabibi and myself. It was a move consistent with The Vatican's unalloyed opposition to the cancellation of June 12 and the incarceration of its Protagonist, Chief Moshood Abiola, and other pro-democratic actors. I do commend the Vatican and its Late Pontiff for defying the bounds of sectarianism to stand against injustice and oppression.

OAU

The African Union did nothing. That organisation has been rightly dismissed as an African debating club, a debating society with no standing army. AU should have a standing army to deal with sit-tight presidents and dictators who have reduced their countries to banana and guinea-corn republics. Their principle of non-

interference is no more realistic. In prison, I wrote two poems capturing my disenchantment at the apathy that the organisation displayed to the Abacha problem.

The OAU

*What a monumental deceit!
A continental social society?
A continental motor club?
A regional boat club?
Tell me, tell me, Mother Africa.*

Grandiose Agenda

*Pompous Semantics
Africa, Africa; this is a facade.*

ILO, ICEM, Amnesty International and Co

The International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM), and all their affiliates maintained a consistent fight to secure our freedom. Several of their publications highlighted our plight to the whole world. One of such publications went to the internet with this very valid claim:

Oil is a very important export earner for Nigeria, producing US\$35 million a day, and providing it with 90% of its revenue. For this reason it appears that trade union rights are being sacrificed at the expense of Nigeria's exports.

In March 1998, the ILO established a commission of inquiry into persistent violations of trade union rights in Nigeria and once more sought the permission of the Nigerian government to visit the country to investigate the situation and visit detainees. The Abacha government consistently denied such repeated requests. Like PENGASSAN, NUPENG is affiliated to the 20-million-strong ICEM. ICEM and ILO—working with organisations such as the Amnesty International—led an international trade union campaign for the release of Dabibi and me. Amnesty International tagged us “Prisoners of Conscience.” They never let up until we won our liberty.

Nigerian Freedom Fighters/Heroes of Democracy

Some prominent Nigerians played important roles throughout the struggle, from 1993 until 1998, when the maximum ruler, General Abacha, ignominiously expired. These people laid down life, liberty, limb and livelihood for the June 12 struggle. In the mode of the anti-colonial struggle for Independence, these contemporary Nigerian freedom fighters quickly emerged to battle the military’s stranglehold on democracy in the country. The civil society, the militant Press, the Labour movement, as represented by the oil workers and the big brothers like NADECO, were deeply involved with other local organisations. Without them, Nigeria would still have remained in the iron grip of Military dictatorship.

Not excluding the vast number that cannot be contained here, these freedom fighters include:

Ganu Fawehinmi, Beko Ransome-Kuti, Femi Falana, Tony Enahoro, Bola Tinubu, Wole Soyinka, Alani Akinrinade, Fedrick Fasehun, Abraham Adesanya, Olisa Agbokoba, Adekunle Ajasin, Ayo Opadokun, Ayo Adebajo, Bola Ige, Aka Bashorun, Wahab Dosunmu, Biyi Durojaiye, Abubakar Umar, Mathew Kukah, Bishop

Adetiloye, Sunday Mbang, Kofo Akerele Bucknor, Chukwuemeka Ezeife, Ndubisi Kanu, Chris Ayanwu, Segun Osoba, Bolaji Akinyemi, John Oyegun, Solanke Onasanya, Ola Oni, Lam Adesina, Olu Falae, Tai Solarin, Mike Ozekhome, Ayodele Akele, Bisi Akande, Abdul Oroh, Dapo Olorunyomi, Adeniji Adele, Wale Oshun, Adeyinka Adebayo, Omo Omoruyi, Polycap Nwite, Bamidele Aturu, Chuka Ubani, Adams Oshiomole, Pat Utomi, Ebun Adegboruwa, Clement Nwankwo, Baba Omojola, Nosa Igiebor, Femi Ojudu, Dan Sulaiman, Femi Aborishade, Shehu Sanni, Ralph Obiora, Fred Agbeyegbe, Felix Oboagwina, Bayo Onanuga, Peter Obadan, Kunle Ajibade, Tunji Abayomi, Onome Osifo-Whiskey, Bamidele Aturu, George Mba, Joe Igbokwe, Niran Malaulu, Utenta Identa, Soji Omotunde, Joseph Evah, Amos Akingba, Festus Keyamo, Mike Iginni, Gani Adams, Joe Okei-Odumakin, Yinka Odumakin, Owei Lakemfa, Kayode Komolafe, Funmi Komolafe, Segun Maiyegun, Ayo Obe, Tokunbo Afikuyomi

June-12 Martyrs

I pay special tribute to the martyrs of that struggle. Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola, to me, remains the great Martyr of the Nigerian democratic struggle. He was murdered too, after the shooting of his beautiful, dutiful, obedient and loyal wife, Kudirat Abiola. We had Alhaja Suliati Adedeji rumoured to have been murdered in relation to June 12, just like Vice Admiral Babatunde Elegbede, Commodore Omotilehinwa, Chief Alfred Rewane, Dr. Sola Omoshola and Mr. Bagauda Kaltho, and hundreds of other unknown Nigerians.

Militant Press

The fight saw the active participation of elements of the Militant Press — *Tell, The News and Tempo, the Liberal Press — The Guardian, Vanguard, The Punch, Tribune and National Concord*. They were just excellent. So were the supportive international media.

Gani Fawehinini

Gani Fawehinmi's chambers severally went to court to press for my freedom by applying for countless Writs of Habeas Corpus. But the junta just would not yield. A great fighter in that struggle.

Ayo Opadokun

I held private meetings with Ayo Opadokun. This Secretary of NADECO later went into hiding, even though this did not save him from going through two terrible detentions under the junta. Even then, Opadokun never sold out. He maintained his consistency all through the struggle.

Ken Saro-Wiwa

I met Saro-Wiwa last at a conference early 1994 at Hilton Hotel, Abuja, organised by Clement Nwankwo's Constitutional Rights Project. The bitter second phase of the June 12 struggle had not really taken off by then. He was his ebullient self. He was asking me about the 1993 phase of the June 12 struggle, for which he declared full support. He briefed me about the Ogoni problem and I counseled him too. When he was detained and I was underground, his kinsmen asked us to call for his release in our press statements and we honoured this request, bringing attention to the plight of the environmentalist and the "Ogoni Eight." Unfortunately, General Abacha had made up his mind to spill the blood of this environmental nationalist.

NUPENG

My comrades in NUPENG were great. They became the arrowhead of the struggle. Nigerians can never forget that the oil workers singularly attracted world attention to the country's political predicament. I know that after MKO was arrested that night, the world expected something to happen and nothing happened.

It was NUPENG that gave an ultimatum and things changed in the country. I salute the oil workers. I salute my President, Kojo Agamene, without whose cooperation NUPENG's legendary struggle would never have materialised. My two deputies, Joseph Akinlaja and Elijah Okougbo, deserve mention in my roll-call of honour. Akinlaja is a committed union cadre who has the benefit of the finest training in unionism across the globe, while Okougbo has a fine training across the globe too. The four of us made up the Kitchen Cabinet. Our stand on June 12 was in the character of NUPENG, for the union's founding fathers built NUPENG to be a modern trade union, a mould in which it would not solely fight for workers socio-economic welfare, but also for the well-being of the people. That was the role it played during the democratic political struggles. Since participating in the political struggle, NUPENG has graduated from being just a trade union, into playing the role of a watchdog of the society. Thus, it has a tripartite character —trade union, civil human rights organisation and societal watchdog.

PENGASSAN

Our senior oil workers in the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria joined the struggle barely a week after NUPENG initiated the struggle. Milton Dabibi was the Secretary, and Owodunni was the President. They were courageous and consistent. Milton Dabibi went to jail from January 1996; and incidentally we regained our freedom the same day. He also won awards, well deserved by him and the PENGASSAN that he led during the struggle for June 12.

Paschal Bafyau, Adams Oshiomhole and NLC

Paschal Bafyau and Adams Oshiomhole have consistently shown commitment to the footsteps of a trade union heritage that began with the Michael Imoudus, the Beyiokus and the Nduka Ezes. These were the first generation of unionists. The Wahab Goodlucks, Nathaniel Pepples, S.U. Basseys, Babs Animashaun, belonged to the second generation of Unionists. The third generation of Unionists comprises people like S.O.Z. Ejiofor, Paschal Bafyau, myself and Hassan Sunmonu (who started as a part-time unionist, and later played a very credible role in Nigeria/Africa Labour Movement, especially when he was able to serve two full terms as NLC President). To this class also belong people like Enas Dubre, the pioneer President of NUPENG, who also played an equally credible and prominent role in the creation of the union and total pragmatist.

Coming from his National Union of Textile Workers, Adams Oshiomole easily rates as one of Labour's strong general secretaries. Ejiofor is one of them. Abdulsalam Salam of the National Union of Local Government Employees is another. So was my humble self. They call us Super General Secretaries. In the NLC, when any of these Super General Secretaries spoke, they could move the whole people. Compared to the rest of us, Adams was young at that time, but he was a very good orator.

However, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) leadership of that era never lived up to expectation, for if they have combined the power of NLC with the muscle of NUPENG, the Abacha regime would have fallen flat in a few days. It was the false hope they gave to the regime, making it believe that NLC did not support the oil workers action, that emboldened Abacha to hold on for a long time.

When I came out from prison, Oshiomhole came to my house to rejoice with me.

Also Sylvester Ejiofor, one of the most cerebral in the Labour Movement came in also then and tried to explain away some of the inexplainable failings of the Labour Congress. But Adams who just then arrived from Kaduna burst into Ejiofor's homily. "Look, look Comrade Adams said we have to apologise to him. That brought down my anger."

The day I arrived my home after I was released from prison, I was shedding tears and my anger was more on the Nigeria Labour Congress for their neglect of the struggle. And was asking: "What happened to organized Labour"?

But the damage had been done. They almost ruined my life. I would have died. Of course when NUPENG gave the ultimatum at the beginning of the struggle, I knew I could be assassinated by Abacha agents. But it never once crossed my mind that I could spend one month in prison without the Labour Movement rising up in arms to fight the government. But to my chagrin, only the oil workers took up the fight, and they were abandoned by the whole central Labour movement of the country. Obviously, I felt bitter. I know what is called solidarity in the Labour movement worldwide. We workers could go to any length to defend a fallen comrade. Yet, the Labour abandoned me

Twenty Two

WHAT NIGERIA LOST IN JUNE 12

June 12 remains the best-organised election this country ever saw. Internationally, it was adjudged the smoothest, freest and fairest election ever conducted in Nigeria's 33-year history and three republics. This was not just the verdict of Nigerian citizens; it had the corroboration of international observers monitoring the polls. The feat had been delivered by a most transparent electoral system, Option A4. The electoral style itself would have represented a worthwhile legacy that Babangida bequeathed on the country, for even till today, people still commend him for it. Past elections in the country usually reported up to 60 million participants. June 12 put a lie to all such returns. Nigerian population stood at an all-time high of 120 million, but despite this, and Nigerians being sensitised about June 12, and the mass turnout of voters for Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola (SDP) and Alhaji Bashir Tofa (NRC), their combined votes still grossed only 14 million. This unequivocally demonstrated the level of high fraud and rigging that had characterised past elections in the country.

Of course, no election anywhere in the world is 100 percent fraud-proof; not even in the USA. A margin of error or rigging of not more than 5 percent could be tolerable. But it becomes alarming where rigging goes above 50 percent up to 200 percent, as obtains in many African countries.

Somewhere I recorded this about “Free Elections and Democracy.”

One bane of democracy in Third World countries is the rampant dishonesty practised in the conduct of elections. Unnecessary and selfish coups by the Military in these countries come about because of the rumpus of the after-effect of such exercises.

One of the best solutions to this profound problem could be offered by such groups as the Central Trade Unions and other professional and interest groups like the Bar Association, the Union of Journalists, Students Union and other human rights groups. These could serve as monitors during state elections and at the end of the day, come out with coordinated reports on the conduct of these elections. At least, the reports of such groups in democracies are more reliable than government functionaries prone to doing government bidding in these countries.

June 12 met the parameters to judge good elections. The common people knew this. That was why when the results were announced, there were no protests on the streets. In fact, people jubilated and I know that Tofa was to congratulate Abiola a few days later, but political *shenanigans* killed that sportsmanly and objective move.

Just around the elections, the Naira dropped to about ₦40 and ₦45 per Dollar. By 1993 it was ₦40. When the polls showed that MKO was leading, the Naira improved to about ₦28 to the Dollar. With an Abiola presidency, everybody expected miracles going by his credentials that included vast international business connections and worldwide goodwill. That stood to be one of the country's greatest gains from an Abiola leadership: the gaining of economic confidence.

All this made June 12 worth-defending. That explains why people like me never blinked when I used the potent weapon of Labour, especially the oil union of Nigeria, to defend that mandate. And all the deprivations and sufferings that Nigerians went through in the struggle were worth it.

In my prison notes, I scribbled this:

Is it the wish of God that in order to enrich the history and civilisation of this country, some of us have to go through such sufferings and torture?

Yes, I do believe so. In fact, personally I feel that MKO would have been a better President after prison. He would have been a good President because prison must have enriched his experience. Before prison, he trusted too many people. It was when he was in prison that he found that those he trusted so much could betray easily. It was a great loss to Nigeria that Chief M.K.O. Abiola —just like Chief Obafemi Awolowo—never had a chance to rule. Even if it was for four years that Abiola ruled, Nigeria would have been the better for it. Or even if he had ruled in the Government of National Unity of three years being canvassed by NADECO and the international community, in the heat of June 12, then it would have sufficed him and the country. He would have set that foundation of real democracy for Nigeria. Democracy would have taken root soundly and rightly.

One other gain would have been the destruction of religious and ethnic dichotomy for ever in Nigeria. Marketing the Muslim-Muslim ticket throughout the country was a herculean challenge for SDP. However, the successful selling of that ticket was total and convincing, even among the entirely Christian Igbo East and the Niger-Delta, all of whom voted overwhelmingly for the MKO-Kingibe ticket. Nobody talked about religion in that election. For the first time, the country pegged politics on ideology. Nigerians expressed

a need to empower credible personalities and their development ideas for moving the country forward. That opportunity we lost with the loss of June 12. That is one of those things that Babangida would always be held responsible for, all his life.

However, one thing still baffles me. Abiola did so much to curry the favour of the generality of Nigerians, including the Emirs and other powerful groups in the North. He sent money to them periodically. He floated a successful football club —“Abiola Babes”— which popularised his name. He ran a business empire and a community-based and national newspaper chain that sold him to the grassroots nationally. He made large donations locally and internationally. He enjoyed colossal international connections. Yet, at the end of the day, all these things failed him. What went wrong?

Kudirat told him one day in my presence: “Look at these NUPENG people, you never even knew them. Now they are the ones fighting your cause. All the people you know, all those people you did so much for, where are these people today?”

Why did old ties and allies fail Abiola?

I feel they failed because Nigerians proved to be fair-weather friends, afraid of taking risks and unable to bear suffering and deprivations. There are people in the world who hate injustice and they cannot do but fight injustice at all costs. But some other people will tolerate injustice, simply because they cannot suffer deprivations. Such people will switch sides when they realise that fighting unrighteousness will cost them their freedom and gains (trappings of office and monetary gains). In fighting dictatorship anywhere in the world, only few people stick out their necks. In the South African struggle, the people experienced a lot of betrayals. The Mau-Mau in Kenya killed more blacks than whites. And the slain blacks were those kinsmen suspected of selling out.

In the case of Abiola, the Nigerian factor of “fair weather friend” played out heavily. As soon as he was locked up, people deserted him.

Of course, you cannot sweep the question of ethnicity under the carpet. June 12 was more severe in the South-West. The North and the East were told by enemies of June 12 to see the struggle as a Yoruba struggle. So what the civil society and the oil union did was just in the spirit of nationalism. Fortunately for MKO, the critical population (as Kingibe usually described it) is in the Lagos and Ibadan axis. When Lagos shuts down (forget Abakaliki, Ughelli, Makurdi and Sokoto), Nigeria comes to a standstill. It is logical. When the banks and money markets and petrol stations shut down, that is what CNN and BBC would report. They would not go to Irrua or Ovu or Nassarawa to monitor anything. The press operates from Lagos. June 12 became something because the world could not ignore Lagos and the South-West.

At the end of the day, June 12 was a Nigerian struggle but it had its hub planted in the West and it took its rhythm from the heartbeat of Westerners. Of course, Northerners like Colonel Abubakar Umar, Vice Marshal Dan Suleiman and Mallam Shehu Sanni added a critical Northern flavour. Thus, nobody can objectively say that the struggle was ‘Yorubanised’. No way. Pa Anthony Enahoro was not a Yoruba man. Neither I, nor the President of NUPENG, Kojo Agamene, was Yoruba. Yet the NUPENG and the oil workers that we led became the arrowhead of that struggle.

Betrayals cropped up in the struggle after Abacha sacked Shonekan, and Abacha played tricks on the people. Many people did not know it, but MKO was even a victim of those tricks. MKO was speaking to me from abroad and he was telling me to cooperate with Abacha, thinking the General was working to restore the mandate. But the betrayal manifested when Abacha took over power

and patronage devolved to his hand and he began to distribute ministerial positions to people. He then appointed people like Lateef Jakande and Ebenezer Babatope, who represented the real cadres, the real ‘babas’ and pillars of June 12. What factors made them bend, I don’t know. We leave that to God and history.

Greed also played a role. Those of the elite and wealthy who should have spoken up went after filthy lucre. They were bribed to keep quiet. And they kept quiet.

But all this behaviour taught us a lot of lessons.

Now I understand human beings more. There were people who stood before Abiola and promised to “swim and drown with him.” I saw many of them. I won’t mention names. But by 1998 when Abiola died, the circle of supporters had whittled down to only NADECO chieftains —both at home and in exile.

People also pointed accusing fingers at the family and children of Abiola. They expected them to have played a more dynamic role. His sons were not kids. They were established in business. Yet, none of them picked up gauntlet. They demonstrated no political commitment to their father’s predicament. After sometimes also a sizeable chunk of the Abiola family appeared to have grown cold feet to the struggle. And people argued that no one could be more ‘catholic than the Pope’. So the lackadaisical attitude of the Abiola clan whittled down people’s interest.

However, those democrats in the forefront of the struggle demonstrated commitment to the end. Only pretenders, whose interest in the struggle waned half-way, dropped out. Many of such are today paying dearly for their political miscalculation.

Agreed, many bounced back and are today enjoying the fruits of democracy, far more than those in the struggle. That is one of the contradictions and paradoxes in the history of June 12.

EPILOGUE: MY VISION

To live happily and to work for others' happiness is the only religion worthy of God. What pleasure, to die surrounded by one's children and be able to say: "I have ensured the happiness of a hundred families. I have had a hard life, but the State will benefit from it: through my worries my fellow citizens live calmly: through my perplexities they are happy, through my sorrows they are gay.

— **Napoleon Bonaparte**

Sometimes you chat with the younger generation and whenever you come up with stories of the “good old days,” they respond with disbelief, reacting as if they were hearing tales from another planet. It keeps me wondering, what has happened to our society?

Like biblical Adam and Eve, we seem to have discarded the age of innocence by succumbing to the lure of individualism, tasting the forbidden fruit of materialism, and wrapping ourselves in the rags of pseudo-modernity. Where on earth did we learn such negative traits?

The truth is, something has gone drastically wrong with our society. In the good old days, we used to be our brother's keepers. We used to mourn with those that mourned. While rejoicing with those that rejoiced. We used to walk in the footprints of the Good Samaritan. In the good old days, Life was simple but meaningful.

I will relate two stories that —believe it or not— took place in this same Nigeria.

Once, while I was travelling in a big commercial bus from Lagos to Warri, in 1971, a pregnant female passenger suddenly went into labour, writhing in pain. The driver was persuaded to stop in a village along the way and other women took this total stranger into

a room provided by the villagers and helped her deliver the baby. The passengers broke into jubilation as she returned to the vehicle with the newborn baby and the journey continued. However, not long afterwards, this woman began to bleed seriously, so much that her blood flowed all over the vehicle's floor and she soon tilted facedown on the seat in front of her, apparently owing faint from losing so much blood. The brother-in-law escorting her, insisted the journey must continue, as they must reach their village in the East that day. However, I, supported by some few passengers insisted that the driver should divert to the University of Benin Teaching Hospital (UBTH) along the route, which he did. As soon as the bus came to a halt, we jumped down and told the UBTH personnel of the development and they immediately took charge, with nurses bringing a stretcher and taking the woman into admission. The Chief Matron told the passengers to continue their journey that as soon as the woman stabilised and got better, the hospital would take her and the baby to her village in an ambulance. On my retrun journey a week latter, I stopped over to check – just in case. Happily I was informed that the hospital actually fulfilled its promise

For me, this gesture was typical, for three years back in 1968, I had been a beneficiary from such selfless magnanimity. While I was working with the Electricity Corporation of Nigeria (ECN), the organisation withdrew our official “landrover” vehicles and made motorcycle loans available to staff, due to the exigencies of the Nigerian Civil War. For sometime, the objection and pleas of my mother and my elder brother prevented me from purchasing a motorcycle. Even then, I accepted lifts from colleagues who had bought the machines and I felt no danger hitch-hiking on their bikes. Soon I could not resist the temptation and, discountenancing the restraint of my relations. I finally purchased a Vespa Scooter. Three months later, the unexpected happened. While riding with

a friend on my Vespa, I got knocked down by a car that had an apprentice mechanic behind the wheel. I hit the ground hard and suffered serious lacerations on my eyelids. I bled profusely from my wounds. A crowd quickly gathered and began to administer First Aid on me. Despite the sympathisers' efforts, however, I bled unceasingly, forcing them to finally rush me to the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH). As soon as we stepped into LUTH, nurses and hospital attendants rushed over and began to administer emergency measures on me —as if they had advance notice of a VIP in distress. They rolled out a stretcher, wrapped me in a blanket, and immediately took me into the theatre —very much akin to the foreign scenes you see on TV of hospital scenes in US or Europe. After stitching up my wounds, the doctors ordered me admitted into the ward. At that stage, I asked to be discharged because if I should sleep overnight at the hospital, my wife would be worried, not knowing what had happened to me. They immediately put in an ambulance and took me home. As in the case of the new mother, no deposits were taken. No questions were asked. No money demanded.

Yes, all this happened in this same Nigeria, where today hospital staff will watch emergency cases bleed to death because the concerned accident or crime victims were unable to come up with the initial deposit. Whatever happened to our society? Why did we change for the worse? No matter how we got to this unenviable point, I believe we can retrace our steps. That belief motivates my activism, my unionism and my politics.

Some of the uninformed will wonder why as a unionist I got so involved in political struggles, instead of confining myself to trade union struggles. My answer is that, politics is a concentrated expression of economics. Politics must take precedence over economics. Hence, our credo during the June 12 struggle was: Seek ye first the political kingdom and every other thing will follow. It

pains me and I am never happy when I see people suffering. Why can't the society be a better place for everybody to live in? To make the world a better place for human beings to live in, that is the greatest philosophy that I hold. And the history of my political struggle is based on this philosophy.

I know that the advocates of "Economism" will disagree and lampoon me for my failing to confine the task of my working class movement to narrow trade union issues of economic struggle against employers and government in order to secure better conditions of service for workers within the framework of bourgeois society. Lenin believed that the struggle by workers for better terms in the sale of their Labour power was essentially not a patriotic action, but a purely selfish trade union struggle. Moreover, Lenin insisted that such a parochial pursuit would lead to the preservation of capitalist wage slavery for long years to come. And in the long term, the fundamental economic interests of the proletariat can only be satisfied by a Labour political action.

Thus, rather than see himself as the union scribe alone, a trade union secretary—as I was— must see himself in the class of political activists and radicals, a tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression —no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of people it affects. Like the rest of the radical group, a union scribe should follow in the steps of those who in the Old Testament went by the name of prophets; in the New Testament they were called apostles. Today they are called watchdogs; they are called social critics; they are called radicals and the "Conscience of the Nation." If their crusade fetches them a stint in jail, they are called "Prisoners of Conscience." And if death comes in the process, they go into martyrdom.

Being close to the people, they know where the shoe pinches. So they must spare no effort in using their powerful Labour organisation as a platform to press for the needs of the society. And what are these

needs? The needs of the people are basic, fundamental, utilitarian and affordable. People want food. They want good roads. They want available and affordable medical care. They want electricity. They want potable water. They want good and affordable education, with jobs afterwards. They want security. They want peace. They want to be able to live anywhere in the country without being discriminated against.

Politically, they want a government that will guarantee that they enjoy everything the Constitution guarantees that they should enjoy. They want freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom to hold religious beliefs and they want to exercise their right to life and liberty.

Fortunately, Nigeria has the natural resources to meet her people's needs. All that is needed, is the political will and a leadership with a people-oriented spirit.

Right now, this is missing. Instead, leadership is seen as a way to the country's honey-pot and a way where politicians can feather their nests and prepare for the rainy days of retirement and old age. No wonder the quest and struggle for political relevance and political office has become a do-or-die matter. And many of those who get into positions have no vision beyond bettering their own fortunes. They have no dreams.

I dream of a country that feels the pains of its citizens and whose leadership applies soothing balm to them. I want a country that will extol meritocracy over nepotism and tribalism; a country where the man would not be discriminated against on the basis of tribe and tongue. A country where we know that indeed tribe and tongue may differ but we stand together in united brotherhood.

I long for a country where Labour and civil society groups are voices reckoned with, where the tilt and stance of Labour and peoples power will decide the electoral fortunes of a government or political

party contesting elections. A strong Labour voice is necessary. Instead of destroying Labour's strong voice, rulers should help it to consolidate as as a strong voice in politics and government. Instead of having the Labour centre fractured because government sees it as an enemy, the workers' movement should be strengthened by workers themselves. The dichotomy between senior and junior workers should collapse. Comrades are comrades, workers are workers—classes are the creation of the exploitative and reactionary bourgeoisie and capitalists. Workers should fight side by side and together—no one should be interested in the selfish creation of personal empires. Workers are one family, they must see beyond the divide and rule tendencies of the exploiting employers and their reactionary cohorts in government and melt into one strong voice. That is my dream.

I dream of a country where the labours of our heroes past will not be in vain and their memories will be kept alive by the actualization of the ideals they canvassed.

I envision a country where men will be men and office holders will dare relinquish their positions on the basis of principles.

I dream of a country recognizing that workers make wealth, and where the worker receives his due.

I want continuity in government policies. Where succeeding governments continue and complete the lofty and desirable projects of their predecessors, instead of making them abandoned projects to be sidelined by new ones that soon become abandoned at the expiration of the originating government.

I pray for a country where brain-drain is reversed. If the young join the brain drain and emigrate out of the country today, it is only because they feel the country has frustrated and stifled their aspiration. Of those outside the country's shores, no more than 2 percent can boast a fulfilled life in the Diaspora. Many of them want to

return home, but the question is, return to what? —unemployment, high crime rate, poverty and want, lack of social security, inadequate infrastructure, epileptic services? I dream of when our brethren in voluntary exile can return home to a meaningful life.

I look forward to where the Niger-Delta will be a peaceful haven. Although the nation's honey-pot, my birth place is today being gradually turned into a hot-bed of restiveness and war for the simple reason that the golden hen starves in the creeks while its products bring comforts to ostriches. That is the stuff of which terrorists and desperadoes are bred. The nation and the oil companies owe the Niger-Delta people a debt, and they should pay up.

I crave a country whose citizens can walk the face of the earth proudly, standing shoulder to shoulder with other peoples anywhere.

My eyes long to see a country where corruption is fought head on and conquered—where there is no hiding place for the thieving public officer. Where people can query—not eulogise—thieves in high places. Where chieftaincy titles and national honours are withheld from those whose reputations raise a question mark.

Where the pensioner gets what he has worked for all his life. Where electricity works. Where the country takes its pride of place in the comity of nations as the Giant of Africa and the pride of the Black Race worldwide.

I envision a country that will not again succumb to military rule —NEVER. Where democracy and popular government will thrive and where dictatorship or authoritarianism will never take root.

Where there will be an enabling environment for industries to thrive, with good roads, regular electricity supply, business-encouraging legislation, motivated manpower and banking loans with low interest.

I crave a Nation where government wears a human face, putting in place social security measures that will bring palliatives

to disadvantaged Nigerians affected by old age, ill-health, unemployment or disability.

I desire justice and equity. With justice and equity, the society becomes a better place for people to live in; there will be no exploitation and there will be no crime. I want a country where there will be no sycophancy, no corruption and no galloping inflation.

The Nigeria I dream of will satisfy our yearnings to have a better country for our people. I want life more abundant for our people. The good life should translate to jobs for the youths, even the way things were in the colonial era and immediately after Independence.

I want true democracy here. I earnestly hunger for true and fair elections, social justice and equity. Once true democracy takes root in this land, with free and fair elections from the intra-party primary level to the inter-party public elections, I think we would have scored a great achievement. In no time, then, we will be one of the greatest nations. Right now, government is personalised and corruption is suffocating.

Time has come to adopt a more acceptable way of playing politics—such politics as will translate to upholding justice and equity, while also putting bread on every table as and when due.

That is the country I wish my generation to bestow on posterity.

EPILOGUE

ODYSSEY AFTER NUPENG

Kokori and Obasanjo

I like to say that General Olusegun Obasanjo, a former Nigerian president, is a very interesting person. I found it relaxing and fascinating each time I was with him. Those moments are fond memories. It was very interesting sharing those moments with him and each time I look back, I laugh heartily; what a man! Our discussions often lasted for a while, and after leaving him, I left with the impression that he was happy with me. But latter events prove that they were mere cosmetics.

The good impressions he gave were not really from his heart. The first time I met him was in 1990. Before then, all I knew about him was hear say. I had this chance of meeting with him when we were campaigning during the Social Democratic Party (SDP) days. The party had just been formed and we were campaigning for the upcoming local government elections. We were equally anticipating the state assemblies and national assembly elections. This would culminate in the presidential elections in 1993.

The SDP chairman, Ambassador Babagana Kingibe, was in the forefront of this campaign. When we arrived at the Ota farm of Chief Obasanjo, he was there to welcome us. We did not waste time and settled for the business of the day. In our discussions with him, he was very nice to everybody and engaged us with dry jokes. Then he entertained, soft drinks, but I noticed that he engaged himself

with something better than what he offered us. He was sipping orange juice drink from a can, the type that was not very common in the country then. So I said to him, “General, it seems you are taking something different from what we were taking.” He did not quite respond to my question. Then, I moved closer to him and said jocularly to him, “General, you are taking your imported juice drink alone.” I told him I wanted part of the juice he was taking. Obasanjo looked at me and said the one he was taking was recommended on medical grounds. I told him I was making my request on medical grounds as well. As I continued to pester him, he called on Kingibe and said — “This NUPENG boy is pestering me too much o.” But Kingibe said, “Don’t mind Frank, that is the way these NUPENG people behave.” “Unionist are always troublesome”, Obasanjo responded. After having our drinks, Obasanjo took us on a tour of the farm. At the end of the tour, he offered to give us crates of eggs to take away. Later on, we all forgot that part of the bargain. That was my first close contact with this maverick of a man.

I think my next contact with him was through proxy, when NUPENG was about to start the big strike in 1993. Our preparation for the strike was on. This was immediately after the annulment of the elections in 1993 when the country was in a tense situation. And NUPENG had already signified her intention to challenge the unilateral military annulment. Obasanjo sent an emissary, one Chief S. Oshinuga, to me over the strike matter. Chief Oshinuga is from Shagamu in Ogun State and he was then one of Obasanjo’s point men. He came and told me that Obasanjo asked him to liaise with some Labour leaders on the resistance struggle against the military that NUPENG was spearheading. He said Obasanjo, like every other well-meaning Nigerian then, agreed with NUPENG, that the military, led by General Babangida and Abacha was holding the country to ransom and Obasanjo, as a former head of state, was

helpless and could do nothing to help the situation. Oshinuga said further that Obasanjo knew the consequences if he openly comes out to dabble on the situation. Oshinuga said he was asked by Obasanjo to express the General's solidarity to our cause. In the process he called six big trade unions, including NUPENG, to offer what he termed his "widow's mite" to the struggle to force the military out of governance. Some of the unions include the local government workers union; the bank workers union; the civil service technical workers union and of course, the petroleum workers union — key unions indeed. He gave each of the union between ₦150,000 to ₦300,000, which was big money then. The gesture was a big surprise to most of us because we all knew Obasanjo as a very frugal man. And for him to have given that kind of money was surprising, to say the least.

I have personally experienced Obasanjo's tight-fistedness at a time. In 1991 or so, the Arewa people organized a fund raising launch for the building of their proposed national headquarters in Kaduna. One of the Dantatas was the chairman of the event and also led the launch. I was invited along with members of the National Executive Council of the SDP to the function. The chairman, Alhaji Dantata, started the launch with a donation of ₦5 million naira, this of course was huge money then. Remember the Dangotes have not hit the stage then. We the SDP NEC, launched with ₦100,000.00 and so did the NRC. When it came to Obasanjo's turn, somebody came out as his representative and he launched with ₦5000.00 (Five thousand) naira on behalf of the General. So for Obasanjo to give us such money then, was as a pleasant surprise to me. However, this romance with the General came to an abrupt end before the end of 1993, when Chief Ernest Shonekan was supported by General Obasanjo to be sworn in as Head of Babangida's Interim National Government. At that time, we in NUPENG and the civil society groups were still

struggling to see to the actualization of MKO Abiola's mandate and were obviously against this strange arrangement of this interim government. From then, we both parted ways for the remaining days of the struggle as Shonekan and his group ascended to power. General Obasanjo later sent Chief Oshinuga again to us to plead for our support and put on hold our resistance. That was when our relationship became sour, even though we were both later ferreted into Abacha's gulag.

Then, about a year later as earlier recorded, I was grabbed by the notorious killer squad of General Abacha and dumped into prison. Obasanjo himself was about a year later arrested by the Abacha regime as one of the mastermind of the Colonel Gwadabe—led military coup and dumped in prison, and thus ended my first chapter with General Obasanjo.

Then, five years later in June 1998, when both Obasanjo and myself were released, another chapter of my relationship with Obasanjo was opened. This was after returning from Bama prison, at a period when I was trying to reorder my life. Some gentlemen came to visit me and announced that they were emissaries of General Obasanjo. I was pleasantly surprised because I never heard from him since 1993 when we both parted ways. The leader of the group was one Mr. Kenny Martins, whom I later come to know as an in-law of the General and then a close confidant of the General. I then asked for the purpose of this visit, and I was told that the General was inviting me for a private meeting. Initially, I hesitated to give my consent but they tried to convince me to see the General. Then I asked for the reason for this meeting. They revealed to me that it borders on Niger Delta problems. That struck a cord in me. I thus fixed a date with them for the meeting, but I still asked Kenny why the man who had just been released would want to discuss the issue of the Niger Delta with me. He replied that I can

only get the answer when I meet with the General. Then, I was the pioneer secretary of the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission, OMPADEC, a position I held for a very brief period and in controversial circumstances.

On the appointed date, Kenny Martins and two other persons came to take me to Ota farms. On getting there, the General received me very warmly. The place was in a dilapidated form which was not unexpected. I remembered seeing Mrs. Stella Obasanjo and some ladies downstairs as the General was ushering me upstairs. On getting upstairs, I noticed that the place was truly dilapidated, the ceiling boards were falling out and the whole place was looking pathetic. That was the effect of his long time in prison. What I was seeing was what was left of the great Obasanjo farm. We then regaled ourselves with prison gist, we particularly recalled our experiences with one of our prison boss/Assistant Comptroller General who once headed Bama prison and then moved to Yola prisons where Obasanjo was. Mallam Imam (not real names) was in Bama prisons for about eighteen months during my sojourn at Bama. He made the prison hell for me. He deprived me of any little privilege that was supposed to be accorded a political prisoner like me. My cell was often searched every week to see whether I had “contraband” such as cash, newspapers/magazine, etc. He re-ordered my lock-up period to my disadvantage. After Bama, this evil of a man was moved to Yola prison in Adamawa State where Obasanjo was domiciled. He got to Yola and visited the same cruelty on the general, and heaven of boasted to the General that he dealt with me when he was at Bama, and that it was now Obasanjo’s turn to taste his sadism. From that date, Malam Imam became the butt of our discussions anytime I met the General. After finishing with this humorous aspect of our meeting, we then moved to serious business. Obasanjo then proposed to me his plans to do something

about the appalling situation in the Niger Delta region; his plans and my role in this new agenda about my region was highlighted to me. I was taken aback, surprised but interested. Here was a man, a former head of state, just released from prison just like me, with such grandiose plan. My first reaction was to ask whether he was now General Abdulsalam Abubakar, the then incumbent head of state, but he asked me to listen to him. He then told me that this new commission he was talking about will not end up like the OMPADEC. He spoke glowingly about his plan to set up the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC).

At the end of that first post-prison meeting with Obasanjo, I came to realize that the military cabal of General Abdulsalam Abubakar had already earmarked General Obasanjo to become the second democratically elected president of the federal republic of Nigeria. The first being Alhaji Shehu Shagari (1979-1983). Obasanjo was subsequently elected and later became the president of Nigeria from 29 May, 1999. Between the presidential elections and the inauguration on May 29, the president-elect plunged into action, inviting various interest groups for discussion. During this period, I noticed people like Chief Oshinuga and Dr. Doyin Okupe became very visible around Chief Obasanjo. I remember on one such occasions when he summoned the Labour group to meet him in his Ota farm. We went there with the newly elected Nigeria Labour Congress executive members. When I introduced Comrade Adams Oshiomole to him as the new president of the NLC, he refocused his look on him, then back to me, and I could imagine what was going on in his mind. Seeing us both small—framed, and suspecting us to be potentially stubborn, his suspicion then later became truism when this same “giant” from the hills of Kukuruku became his achilles heel for the almost eight years of Obasanjo’s regime. Obasanjo was an advocate and apostle of unbridled deregulation of

the downstream sector of the petroleum industry, while the Nigeria Labour Congress, under Oshiomole's watch, saw that stance of government as totally anti-people. However, at the end of Obasanjo's reign, he was unable to accomplish his total deregulation. Comrade Oshimole's NLC was unable to retain complete subsidy on petrol. We in Labour have always believed that the issue of government subsidizing certain essential commodities in the economy has never been the bane of the economy. Rather, the problem has been the lackadaisical attitude of government supervision of the monies that are directed into such ventures. Because of inept and corruption-prone attitude of government, the people end up being the losers. This has been clearly made manifest in the big petroleum subsidy scam that rocked the country in 2012.

OBJ AS PRESIDENT

NDDC/BPE

During my many interactions with OBJ when he was president—elect, he clearly exhibited his obsession with this Niger Delta project. He told me that one of the first bills he will send to the national assembly after his inauguration will be the NDDC bill, which he did with the anti-corruption bill (EFCC). But along the line, the NDDC bill was delayed by the national assembly, but was eventually passed into law in late 2000.

When in May 1999, OBJ moved into Aso Rock to begin his first term as the President of the Federal Republic, the duo of Chief Oshinuga and myself were accorded free access to Aso Villa anytime we called to see the President. On many occasions, he invited us. On such occasions, he would specially hail me. He would at times come out to the waiting room near the main door to his office, to call my name loudly to the hearing of other dignitaries waiting to see him. During such periods, OBJ would loudly announce that

“Kokori is my senior,” before everybody around. Actually, what he meant by this was the fact that I was senior to him in the hierarchy of prisoners during our days in prison. That was how close we were in those early days of his presidency. This made me and my friend, Oshinuga, to be so confident of our relationship with the number one citizen, and of course believing that any of our modest requests will be granted by the President.

My first shock from the President came when in late 2000, the NDDC board was to be constituted. The news was everywhere. I tried to reach Mr. President through my usual channel, putting my calls through the Chief Security Office, (CSO) or the ADC. I got no reply from my many calls, until one evening in late 2000. As I was watching the television, the news was flashed that one Mr. Godwin Omene had been appointed the Managing Director / Chief Executive Officer of the commission. Mr. Omene, a former deputy MD of shell is from my senatorial district. Every other call I made from that day to Mr. President was either dropped or ignored. Thus ended my first post-prison romance with OBJ. During this period also, Oshinuga, who was also angling for the position of special adviser for Labour affairs was also ditched. Thus, life went on without our dreams of being in the government of OBJ coming to fruition.

I had just retired from NUPENG then, so I was back in the job market. To make myself busy, I set up a Labour consulting firm, the Network Labour Development Centre (NLDC), in Lagos. Our brief was on reconciliation and mediation in Labour dispute between employees and employers. I was getting some job satisfaction from that office. Initially when I started, I had so much drive and enthusiasm to fulfill a mission. Obviously, I was very qualified and experienced for this assignment. I believed that the experience I had gathered over the years will make the NLDC the number one labour mediation and conciliation center in the country, hoping that getting clients from the unions would not be a problem. At least

that would keep me busy as I was just 57 years when my comrades retired me from NUPENG, using the “Mandela” stunt.

However, after opening this office, I was surprised that the anticipated clients were not pouring in as expected. Now the “great” Kokori, the man who bestrode the Labour-industrial relations sector of the oil sector for 25 years, has to go out to search for consultancy job. But how do I start?

However, one day as I was going through the papers in 2001, I saw a news item where it was reported that the Bureau for Public Enterprise (BPE) has just brought in some expatriate Labour consultants from America to handle the Labour aspect of the privatization agenda of the Obasanjo government.

I was sad after reading the story. How can this country go abroad to hire Labour/industrial ‘experts’ to be heavily remunerated with our scarce resources and here in this country we have hundreds of such persons who could do this job better. I then said to myself that if the Mohammed will not come to the mountain, then mountain will surely go to the Mohammed. The next day, I boarded a plane to Abuja to see the BPE people. My first port of call was the Director General’s office. After the usual curtsies, I was informed by the personal secretary to the DG that the man was in a board meeting. Still carrying my old brashness from NUPENG, I quickly brought out my complimentary card and handed it over to the secretary to hand it to the DG in the board room. I personally insisted the secretary should make sure that the DG receives it. To my pleasant surprise, I saw a diminutive, business-like-looking young man, coming behind the young lady into the waiting room. I then introduced myself to him and he said he was happy to meet me, and then he asked about my mission. This dapper-looking- young man was Nasir El Rufai, then just cutting his teeth as the famous “Accidental Public Servant.” I said to him that I came to see him

in connection with Labour relations issues in the bureau and he became more attentive. Earlier, he has informed me that he was in the middle of a board meeting and, in fact, came out briefly for the respect he had for me. So now he is all ears to hear part of my story. I began by asking why the BPE in the first instance should recruit foreign “experts” to handle the plenty Labour problems that was surely going to bedevil the bureau. His reply was encouraging, saying that it was a surprise that when they were thinking about the foreign consultants, their mind never thought of us, the veterans of the trade unions. There and then, he asked me to forward my CV to his office, directing his secretary to take me to the office of the legal adviser of the BPE, who was Mrs. Irene Chigbue, who later took over from El Rufai as the DG. Mrs. Chigbue was also pleasant and after the usual formalities, my papers were passed to the national council on privatization, headed by Atiku Abubakar, the then Vice President of the federation. When the NCP finally approved the job for me, my portfolio was to handle all Labour related issues in the critical sectors of oil and gas; transport, including maritime; and power. What a big assignment!. Yes, it was quite an elaborate task. Then I was given my job classification in early 2002. My remuneration and other entitlements were agreed upon.

I remember one of the first assignments I undertook for the bureau, even before my appointment was formalized, was the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) job. At that period, NEPA was to be privatized and this big labour problem involving thousands of workers in that volatile sector, mainly the issue of separation benefits, covering gratuities and pensions, were to be settled. The BPE, being the supervising agency, decided to host a sensitization workshop involving all the major trade unions in the power sector, including the radical National Union of Electricity Employees (NUEE) and the Senior Staff Association of Electricity

workers. This workshop was scheduled to hold at the banquet hall of the Eko Hotels Lagos. The DG of the bureau and top functionaries of the agency were all present, including some key players in Human Resources Management. Somehow, the target of the workers, Mallam El Rufai, was inexplicably absent. His deputy, Irene Chigbue, however, stood in for the bureau. The American experts were also present, I remember seeing Oby Ezekwesile; the DG of the Nigeria Employee's Consultative Association NECA, Mr. Oshinowo, and other technocrats from the presidency around. We had a full house with NEPA union leaders from the 36 states of the Federation and Abuja present. The atmosphere was tense and anger was written boldly on the faces of worker delegates. The parley was to last for three days. Speakers were lined up for the various sessions, including the American "experts", egg-heads on privatization from the presidency and the private sector. The first session started with the DG's address. Immediately, confusion and rowdiness took over. There was palpable anger on the faces of the workers who were drawn from across the country, from Sokoto to Calabar, from Lagos to Maiduguri. This was expected, as an experienced trade unionist, I knew it was not going to be an easy task to sermonize job losses to a multitude of Labour leaders, sent from various chapters of electricity workers across the country. I had to step in by raising a Labour solidarity song "there is victory for us ..." the whole hall stood up on their feet to echo the great Labour song of the revolution.

Then the management sensing the thick tension in the air, asked me to chair the first session. Mechanically, I was able to handle that session to the end. Anytime I noticed tempers flaring up, I called for short break for close-door intervention with five persons each from the interest groups of workers and the management. However, at the end of the first session, the BPE management, who have penciled

down about six person to chair the six sessions during the three days meeting, now appealed to me to carry on. So instead of one session, I ended up chairing all the sessions. I remember the leader of the American experts appealing to me not to leave them alone. At the period I was doing all this, I was yet to receive my formal letter of engagement. For those hectic three days, I was not paid a kobo. I did not ask and they did not even offer anything. I was happy to do it gratis. But the signal was clear. I latter heard that the news of what happened at the Eko Hotels, filtered to Abuja and within two months, my contract was sealed. However, the short period in which I worked for the BPE is a story for another day.

NNPC

Yes, after retirement I wanted to be busy to keep life going after being disappointed by OBJ. And of course I am familiar with the big sectors where frequent Labour crises were rampant. This time, engineer Funsho Kupolokun had just taken over the helms of the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) as the Group Managing Director (GMD). An appointment was made to meet with him. On the appointed date, protocols were waived, at least for an old comrade. The GMD, Funsho Kupolokun, was very warm in his reception. The waiting room was empty. I was surprised, because for all I knew about that office, it was one of the busiest in the world. There you will often meet big oil men, sheiks and all, both local and international, all always waiting to see the big man, who is lucky to be there, to cut big business. After the usual curtsies, I again thanked him for making time to receive me. He retorted that “even armed robbers still know their boss.” Figuratively, he was referring to my old days in NUPENG when my presence in any establishment in the industry signified Labour power. Before my mission was discussed, he called for the presence of the head of public affairs

department, Dr. Levi Ajuonoma. I have known Levi way back in his days as a reporter with NTA Channel Ten television in Tejuosho, Lagos. He was excited to see me. The GMD was business-like and within few minutes, we finished our discussion and Levi Ajuonoma was asked to prepare an appointment letter for me as Consultant, Labour/Community Affairs, Special Reference Niger Delta Matters. Ajuonoma's public affairs department was asked to oversee my company's affairs. Obviously I was excited. Now I have two big portfolios, that is the BPE and the NNPC, two big corporate giants under my brief and some smaller briefs under my watch. So, from then, I will have much to occupy my time. In fact, that was what I needed after I retired from NUPENG. I was just 57 yrs old when I exited NUPENG, so I was fairly young to. When I left NUPENG in January 1, 2001, I was least prepared to go into the business world. I had no experience in any business. In all my years in NUPENG, it was all about the proletariat struggle, my training all over the world was based on liberation studies. Then the cold war was raging between the eastern block countries led by the Soviet Union (USSR) and the western block led by the United States of America (USA). Those were the days we talk Marxism, Leninism, lumpism, proleterianism, and all other 'ism'. All my basic comfort was then provided by NUPENG and international solidarity groups. Air tickets and hotel accommodation to anywhere in the country and elsewhere were provided without stress. Yes, for about 25 years I was a man of the world. During my frequent official programmes abroad, I saw the good part and the drawbacks of socialism, communism, raw capitalism, and liberal capitalism. But my romance was more with socialism. Later on, as I was growing older, I started leaning towards centre right socialism which is today's social democrats.

So, the whole of my 25 yrs in the labour movement evolved around the struggle for egalitarianism. Yes, we wanted an equitable society

for all, where the good things of life are distributed to all citizens. Now in Nigeria and most parts of Africa, this dream had become utopia. So I was very much unprepared to face the competitive world of business outside the trade unions. I have left NUPENG unprepared. The only area I could excel now is narrowed to Labour matters. But now my hands are full, and I can be busy. However, events later made me realize that being a “powerful” Labour leader was quite different from being a contract-seeking consultant.

Gradually, I started seeing the true colour of what the hustling self-employed Nigerians goes through. Even with all the clout, the fame, and all that I gathered over the years, I was a neophyte in one very essential area. Rub my back, I rub your back. Yes with my name and antecedence, nobody dares to mention that, and since I was a novice in that area, I didn’t know how to “behave”. At the end of the day, I was frustrated out of my “big” consultancy portfolio by people with insatiable hunger to make money at all costs. In all this, the Nigerian factors cropped in: pettiness, greed, and all. Thus ended my incursion into the world of business in my beloved Nigeria.

OBJ continued: The big disappointment

After an interlude of about 24 months around mid-2003, the president remembered me again. That was the period when the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting was holding in Abuja (CHOGOM). A call came to me from the President, “Hello Frank, where are you?”

“I am in Lagos, Sir.”

“Please come over to Abuja now,” he said.

“Okay, Sir.”

I was surprised and excited. I got myself prepared, and off I went immediately to Abuja. Also at this period, there was a fuel subsidy strike ultimatum hanging over the head of government, given by

the Labour Congress. When I arrived at the villa, some officials who saw me thought that I came in for the mediation meeting that was already going on then between Labour and government. Before my arrival, arrangement had been made for my accommodation. In fact, the protocol people told me that all decent hotels in Abuja were fully booked but the president had requested that they must quarter me at the Command Guest House right inside Aso villa. Immediately after I checked in, a call came in from the front office, requesting me to meet an emissary from the president. I was then informed by this man that the president has requested me to join him for lunch. During lunch, we had about three other persons around. As usual, OBJ was warm, regaling me with his usual boisterous jokes.

Then after lunch, he took me to a more private corner. Looking at me straight in the face, he asked, "Frank, are you prepared to go back to the NDDC?" I said, "of course." He said, "okay." And he told me he had just relieved Mr. Godwin Omene of his job as the MD of the NDDC. Then the news had not been made public. Again I was surprised and anxious. After that, he held me by the hand and we moved to the big sitting area. I remembered one funny incident that happened as we were moving to the parlour. As we moved past a television stand, a football match was going on. And OBJ paused a while to peep at the match, he asked the security detail who were watching about the score line. The reply from his aides was that Nigeria was leading with one goal. OBJ was so excited and responded heartily, "Nigeria go show them pepper." Happily, later on we heard that Nigeria won that match. In our short discussion after lunch, OBJ gave me some insight into the assignment he was about to give me. Then I was taken back to my quarters. Later in the evening I was taken back to meet the president for dinner. This became my routine for the next five days. On some occasions, after dinner, I would stay up with him late into the night, till about

1.a.m he would be receiving visitors, mostly the elites of the ruling People's Democratic Party. It was during the Audu Ogbe tenure. Sen. Ita Giwa was his presidential liaison officer then, Chief Tony Anenih, Chief Bode George were also very visible then, including Funsho Kupolokun, then his presidential assistant on petroleum matters. Mrs. Oby Ezekweseli was always visible during this time when I visited the villa for my lunch and dinner with Mr. President. Now, fellow compatriots, can anybody say that a man in my position will not then claim that he is close to the president? In fact, I was almost becoming one of his closest ally. I noticed that Bode George showed so much loyalty to him. Then, the personality of Oby Ezekweseli has not fully burst into public consciousness; I saw her sitting on the rug close to OBJ's feet. Surprisingly, Bode George also did same. There was one evening when I was there with the president as usual. It was after dinner and Anenih and some other people were with OBJ too. The president said jokingly, "Frank, as you can see, is my friend." Anenih retorted that he was a closer friend than I was. Again, OBJ claimed that we (OBJ and I) were closer because we were both graduates of Abacha's gulag, and then there was a general laughter. That evening, Chief Anenih was sitting beside me. At a point, he complained to me about Adams Oshiomole whose NLC was dangling a strike ultimatum at the government. He requested me to talk Oshiomole out of the strike. Jocularly, I retorted, saying, "Leader, haba, Adams is your son, reach out to him and talk with him." Anenih replied by saying that at the beginning Adams was listening to him, but somehow the man has changed. I then promised that I will try to reach Adams. Of course I never did.

My short stay at the villa continued monotonously. I would wake up, watch the news, read newspapers and rest. Anytime Mr. President needed me, I would be summoned. Sometimes, late in the night, I would be alone with OBJ, with him browsing through state papers and occasionally talking to me. At such periods, I would be

wondering what was going on through his mind. He was so warm and happy with me. Even though I saw no one around, I knew there were security and domestic aides watching. At some periods, he might just call out and an aide will appear. Also, one of his closest domestic aides then, Mr. Bodunde, was always in the shadows around him no matter how late it was. With such closeness and comradeship, who will tell me that I wasn't close to the president? On the fifth night of my stay at the villa, I was watching the news as usual in my room. This should be around 9pm. My intercom phone rang. It was from the front office and the receptionist said, "Sir, the president's bodyguard is here to see you." I requested for her to put the man on line. He said I was asked to come with him to the villa. During my stay at the villa, a plain cloth security detail and a driver took me to and fro in my daily shuttle between the short distance from the presidential quarters to the Command Guest House which is located in the foot of the famous Aso Rock.

That evening, after our dinner, he told me that he was experiencing some difficulties in reaching the then chairman of the NDDC, Mr. Onyeama Ugochukwu; that the man was outside the country. And since the man was the person I was going to work with in re-engineering the commission, it was only fair he brought both of us together before the official announcement of my appointment.

And he added that in about a week's time, Ugochukwu would have returned then he would send for me so as to conclude the matter. He sounded so convincing. He asked Bodunde to give me ₦50,000.00 for my transportation. I left for Lagos. Lo and behold, that was the end of "Captain Marvel".

One week passed, and no call from Mr. President. My calls through his aides that were previously answered promptly were ignored. I tried several times until I was frustrated. Before the end of the second week, I heard over the Network News that one Hon. Emmanuel Aguariavwodo, my kinsman from Ughelli North

Local Government Area of Delta, State has been appointed by Mr. President to take over from Egnr. Omene who had been relieved of his post. I was aghast over the betrayal. To add to my pains, there was no more contact from the presidency. Try as much I could, there was no way to reach Mr. President again; all my efforts to reach him through his aides were fruitless. OBJ again jilted me without qualms, without caring about the way I would feel. This was the second time. This was during the CHOGM conference in 2003. What breed of a man was this? Fortunately for me, in all these period of my comradeship with OBJ, I never mouthed anything to anybody outside my nuclear family.

Those times were very remarkable. There was this time in 2003 when he rewarmed himself towards me. He would call me from Abuja and inform me that he was coming over to Lagos on a private visit and ask me to be at the presidential wing of the airport to receive him. At the airport, there would be no dignitaries, which, I think, was deliberate. At times, the governor of Lagos State will be present, but alone, without an entourage. Most times, I would be the only civilian in the midst of senior security chiefs there to welcome him. From the airport, he would ask me to join him in his presidential chopper on the short flight to his Ota farms. This flight usually took about eight minutes. Because of the smallness of the chopper, all the security chiefs, except the CSO, were ordered to follow by road to Ota. They included the Assistant Inspector General (AIG) of Police and Director of State Security Services (SSS). On such occasions, I may spend the whole day with him. On one occasion, after airport protocol, as we were about boarding the chopper, Governor Tinubu whispered to me, "Frank talk this matter with the president." And I said, "But you are the governor." Clearly, this was the period when the relationship between the governor of Lagos State and the president was going sour.

Marvel Akpoyibo, the airport police commandant then, was

always present to welcome the president. This police boss, who is my kinsman from Ughelli local government area of Delta State, once called me aside and asked point blank. He said, “Brother, why don’t you ask this man to give you a befitting appointment in government to enable you help in governance.” He said the country needed people of my caliber to serve. My retort was that the president knows what to do.

One other day when I was in the farm with OBJ, I called Mr. Kayode, the Chief Security Officer to the president, aside and asked him quietly, “Kayode, you know how close I am to the president, you know how much affection he shows me, so why has he refused to offer me one responsible appointment in his government?” The young man, in the usual secret police fashion, was quiet for a while, and replied jocularly, “Look Comrade, actually the president was serious about offering you that job at that first time in 2000, until Engr. Omene came with his magic.” And we all laughed over it.

WHY NNDC?

Many people reading this memoir may not understand why I am dwelling so much on this NNDC job. Yes, I was sentimentally attached to any programme that will bring about great improvement in the living standard of our people in the Niger Delta region. The poverty of the people, the monumental environmental degradation, the care-free attitude of the giant oil multinational companies who siphoned billions of dollars from these lands, the bribery-induced compliance of government agents employed to monitor these (IOC’s) have all contributed to make that part of the country one of the most degraded and abused environments in the world. Since the discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1956 in today’s Bayelsa State in the Niger Delta, the problem of neglect of the area have become a reoccurring decimal. The Willink commission of the fifties was set

up by the colonial administration to find a solution to this problem, followed by President Shehu Shagari's committee on one and half percent interventionist fund to serve as a palliative to the people, and President Babangida's 1992, Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) where I played a flitting role in 1992.

Now came this big dream of General Obasanjo which he has earlier shared with me to turn this region, the honeypot of Nigeria, to an El Dorado. Naturally, I became interested and glued to the project. I started thinking of the wonderful things I could do for our people. Among them was the completion of the famous East West road that has remained on the drawing board for years; improving health facilities and education; and other infrastructures that make life comfortable. I had thought about how government funds allocated to the commission would be properly managed through due process and proper accountability. My dream was huge. One of the things I was obsessed with was the dilapidated state of health care in the region, which was also the situation in the larger Nigerian family. One thing that struck me when I came out of prison in 1998 was the medical situation in the country. I was undergoing preliminary medical checks in my family clinic when the question of proper scanning came up. There arose a big problem. There was no functioning MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) machine anywhere in the country. This was not an isolated case. In other areas of medical examination, the issue is the same. How can we grow in situations like this? Surely these were some of the critical areas where I felt that Nigerians deserve more from their leaders. My obsession about this NDDC job was for me to show to the people of the Niger Delta that there are people who can make a difference in governance. But OBJ refused to give me a chance.

OBJ continued: 3rd term

After my 2003 episode with OBJ, I said to myself when I arrived Lagos from Abuja that I was through with this man. I sat down to meditate, replaying all my meetings with him and all the disappointments. Even though from the bottom of my heart I decided not to rely on him any longer, fate again brought us together in 2005. This was late in 2005 when the news of the sudden death of the first lady, Mrs. Stella Obasanjo, broke out. The First Lady had gone to Spain for a medical surgery and she had died in the process. The whole country was in shock. I personally felt the shock because I had met her on some occasions when I had dinner at the villa with OBJ. On some of those occasions when we met, I always asked of her father. Her father, Dr. Abebe, the patriarch of the famous Abebe clan of Irukekpen in Ishan, Edo state, was a colleague when we both served as members of the Constitution Review Committee (1987-1988) in one of General Ibrahim Babangida's endless transition programmes. Everybody was paying condolence visits to the president. I decided to condole the president at Abeokuta during the burial ceremonies. The public ceremony for her was held at the MKO Abiola Stadium. The crowd was overwhelming, a good tribute to a loved First Lady. The next day after the dust to dust event was reserved for private condolence visits to the president at his private residence in Abeokuta. I also decided to pay a personal condolence visit to him that day. The small crowd of sympathizers was made to stay outside the president's modest Abeokuta home, to be sorted out by the protocol men. We all took our turns to go in and pay our condolences. At any given time, the protocol people made sure there were no more than forty persons in the courtyard. The president sat with some of his close aides at the front table. We the sympathizers moved in a solemn queue, and one by one we took turns to meet the president. He stood shaking hands with each individual as they moved past him. When it got to

my turn, I moved to him and whispered my condolences. But to my surprise, the president held on to me asking, “Frank, where have you been all this while?” I replied politely and tried to move on, since those behind me were eager to take their turn. The president held on to my hand, trying to show some affection towards me. This has always been his attitude anytime he sees me as I already narrated. Even in that solemn situation, he asked me to see him again at the villa in Abuja immediately all the ceremonies were over. I stated my observation, saying that it was not always easy to gain access to the president because of protocol. He then called one of his aides, Mrs. Remi Oyo, who was then the Special Adviser to the president on media. He thus requested her to fix an appointment for me. He told me that after the obsequies, he would travel to America for a meeting and immediately he is back from that trip, he would meet with me. I then exchanged telephone numbers with Remi Oyo. As I was walking out, Chief Gbenga Daniel, the then governor of Ogun State, walked to me and showed me curtesy, he requested the photographers to take our snapshot together. I then returned back to Lagos. After this sober meeting with the president, I left with the feeling that OBJ was now a changed person, especially with the incidence of the First Lady’s sudden death. Two weeks later, after he returned from the USA, I then put a call to his Special Assistant on media, Remi Oyo. She promised me that she would arrange an appointment for me as soon as possible. She was polite. But after a week, there was no reply from her. I then called again. This time, there was no response. I repeated the calls and sent text messages; no reply. But how can Remi Oyor refuse to pick my calls and even reply my SMS messages? Of course, she must have received negative signals from her principal, the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. That is the way it has always been. When these Nigerians are in positions of power, they strip themselves from all human

feelings. Their aides too become insensitive. I was already used to this game. Since my retirement from NUPENG in January 2000, I had gone through this route several times.

OBJ continues

After this 2005 episode with OBJ, I again started wondering about the make-up of this man. Promises are made to be kept but I am being made to believe that promises are mere frivolities, as far as OBJ is concerned. In all this, I don't know where to place my relationship with the most powerful man in my country.

One day, sometimes in 2003, I was alone with the president, having dinner in his Ota farm residence and I politely asked a question, "Sir, why is it that in this past four years of your tenure, you refused to give me a job in your government." He gave me a long gaze and said, "Frank, this time I am categorical, I will surely offer you something this time. You see, I have not been categorical with you before." But this "categorical" statement was in 2003, now in 2005 this "categorical" promise has not come to fruition.

In all these years of my interaction with OBJ, I was always sharing my experience with members of my family and some close associates. The popular refrain from most of my associates was that my type of person may not be acceptable to Obasanjo. That he may believe that I am too independent to work with. But I disagreed with them. My reply to them was that the president was the most powerful man in the land, he has the power to hire and fire, so what was his problem? I think the man just enjoys being mercurial. After the 2005 episode, I decided to have a total break with OBJ. But fate again will not let me be. This was during the tail end of OBJ's second tenure in 2007. We, the opposition leaders in Delta state, have just nominated Chief Great Ogboru as the gubernatorial candidate of the Democratic People's Party (DPP). But there was this fear that

the opposition's votes don't count in Delta State elections, because the ruling party are adept at election rigging. Before then, all efforts of the opposition to wrest power from the ruling party through popular votes have been frustrated by the ruling party. At this period, we knew that Mr. President was having a frosty relationship with Chief James Ibori, the Delta State Governor.

The opposition, DPP, then mandated three elders of the party to see the president at the villa in Abuja to at least plead with him to allow a level playing ground during the 2007 governorship elections in Delta State. I was nominated with two other elders; Senator Fred Brume and Chief Michael Asaboro, to pay a visit to the president to perform this assignment. After all protocols, we were invited to the villa for this meeting. As we were stepping into the president's office, we met the president in his element, he was in a quite boisterous mood. "Hey Kokori, are you still alive? Come, come in." He turned to my two colleagues and said, "You see this Kokori, he refused to work with me." I was stunned. How could this man make such a statement after what he has done to me? I tried to draw his attention to the true position but he waived me off. As we left his office after our discussions with him, one of my colleagues, Michael Asaboro, was not happy with what he heard from the president and was not ready to accept my explanations. He said, "Look, Kokori, if you know you were not ready to take a job from the president because of your activism, then you should have contacted some of us who were ready to take such offers." I observed that he was not happy with my so called "rigidity". I tried to explain, but the man believed that the president cannot "lie".

These days, when I tell people about all the disappointments I got from OBJ, their popular refrain to me was that some of his friends that have contributed to his success story have even been more disappointed. What a man!

During this meeting with OBJ, we also raised the James Ibori's ex-convict case, which was ongoing then. We asked why government was not decisive on the matter, since it was obvious that the electoral laws were very clear on the matter. He told us that our lawyer was not doing enough. He then advised us to change our lawyer and hire Chief Afe Babalola, his personal lawyer. We left Abuja that day for Ibadan to meet with Afe Babalola, who took the brief. Along the line, OBJ settled with Ibori. The case then wobbled and finally "died".

The 2010 Meeting

After my meeting with OBJ in 2007, there was a three-year gap before fate brought us together again in 2010, this time at his new hill top mansion in Abeokuta. Professor Maurice Iwu had just been removed as head of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and Nigerians were clamoring for a better replacement for him. The popular refrain was that any person who would step into that position must be a person of proven integrity, experienced, and above sixty years of age. Obviously, I was well suited for the job, and decided to go for it. I recalled that the same job was offered to me in 1998 on a platter of gold by General Abdulsalami Abubakar, when I just came out of prison, but I was not too interested then, because of my decision to go back to NUPENG to rebuild the union. This time, due to pressure from my children and the fact that I am now available, I decided to give it a try. My first move was to reach the then acting president, Goodluck Jonathan. My next port of call was at Abeokuta, to meet the ever mercurial OBJ, to make him add his push. At his hilltop home, he received me warmly as usual. He thereafter introduced his new wife, Madam Bola to me. I was happy for him. He invited me for lunch with his wife. After the lunch, I raised the issue of INEC with him. But to my greatest surprise, he said, "Frank, which job did I give to you last?" I said, "General,

you never gave me any job throughout your tenure. It has been a catalogue of disappointments.” “No, no, no, I gave you a job in this commission.” I repeated that he never did. But he insisted he did. Then I challenged him to mention the commission, I even led him by mentioning the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). He was clever, he replied in the negative. But he still insisted on giving me a job in a phantom commission. But I knew he was acting. Back to the subject that brought me to Abeokuta. I raised the issue of the INEC job and why I felt qualified to take up that responsibility. He nodded approvingly, and told me that he would surely act on it. He then observed that I was eminently qualified for the position and that if I could not get the chairmanship position, I could then settle for at least a federal commissioner at the commission. I left OBJ in high spirits and departed for Lagos. At the end of the day, this also ended in smoke.

In all of these, my wonder was why all these unfulfilled promises by OBJ to me? Why all these acting? Why did I have so much confidence on this man even after each disappointment? I think the answer is in my nature. I have always believed and acted same, that a man’s word should be his bond, especially when I know that what I was requesting from the president was within his powers to give. So why should I doubt a president who “categorically” gave his promise to me!

Meeting General Abdulsalam Abubakar

Immediately after the death of General Sani Abacha in mysterious circumstances in June 1998, the military high command installed General Abdulsalam Abubakar as the new Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, after some infighting. Gen. Abubakar was before then the Chief of Defence Staff to the Abacha junta; a thoroughbred gentleman officer. One of the

first assignments he undertook was to order the release of detained political prisoners in batches. I was in the first batch of nine prisoners released on 16th June 1998. The others were Obasanjo, Milton Dabibi, Olu Falae, Chris Ayanwu, et al. At that period, I never had any inkling that the new head of state was the husband of Justice Fatimah Abubakar, who was a colleague at the Constitution Review Committee (CRC) (1987-1988) and Constituent Assembly (1988-1989), where we both served. The CRC was a small body of forty-four members. Here, we had better rapport among ourselves unlike the Constituent Assembly where we had a population of over five hundred members. Mrs. Abubakar was a nominee of the Niger State government, serving as both Permanent Secretary and Solicitor-General of Niger State. I remember that during our plenary sittings at the CRC, she would come to my rescue during debates where the chairman, Justice Buba Arado, would fail to recognize me, while recognizing the Senior Advocates (SAN) among us. She would jocularly call the attention of the chairman by saying, "Chairman, the comrade is raising up his hand." The chairman would laugh and then recognize me.

During the years of my solitary detention at Bama prison, I never knew that this good-natured woman still remembered me. I was later to know that during those dark periods, she was continually appealing to her husband to intervene by speaking with the authorities so as to secure my release. The husband, Gen. Abubakar, later told me after my release that he was helpless because he, as the Chief of Defence Staff and three-star General then, had less power than a major, Al Mustapha, who was then serving as the Chief Security Officer (CSO) to General Sani Abacha. That was in consonance with the terror reign of the dark-goggled General.

So, within two weeks of my release, the Head of State made contact through Segun Osoba to invite me to the villa where he told

me of the difficult circumstances he passed through while serving as the chief of defence staff under General Abacha. He told me he was sorry for what I passed through in the hands of the Abacha regime and then asked about my wellbeing, suggesting that in case I needed any assistance from the government, they would be willing to help. He asked about my pending trip abroad for my medical check up. I then thanked him for his concern but assured him that I may not need any assistance from government then, informing him that my trips and medicals will be fully sponsored by international trade unions. That the immediate one I was about undertaking had been fully covered by the American Federation of Labour / Congress of Industrial Organisation (AFL/CIO). That was how naïve I was then. The Head of State offering me, a newly released prisoner of conscience, a “blank cheque” and I, refusing the offer. At a stage during our discussions, I remembered him asking me to recommend a credible retired Labour leader to him, whom he would appoint as Head of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), but it would be better if I could accept the offer. I promised that I would try to recommend somebody. But I had a problem. The person that immediately came to my mind was Alhaji Hassan Sunmonu, then serving as the Secretary General of the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU). This man had so much love and commitment to his job and would surely turn the offer down. The next two persons on my list were Comrade Obua and Alhaji Aliu Dangiwa who was an experienced unionist. Obua served for so many years as the Deputy Secretary General of the NLC and was at that period, serving as one of the judges at the National Industrial Court (NIC), and Alhaji Aliu Dangiwa was a one-time Secretary General of the NLC. At the inception of the present NLC in 1978, Dagiwa was recruited by the Labour Congress from the Ahmadu Bello University where he was then working as a

lecturer. Immediately I left for Washington DC, U.S.A to undergo my medicals and to receive the prestigious George Meany Labour award from the American Federation of Labour Congress of Industrial Organisation (AFL/CIO), I remembered General Ajiborisha, then serving as the principal staff officer to the president, phoning me in Washington to remind me of the offer. Later on, Justice Ephraim Akpata was appointed for the job. Maybe the two names I finally submitted did not fulfil government criteria. One other matter which I placed before General Abubakar was the issue of lifting the ban placed on NUPENG, PENGASSAN and the NLC. I was happy to hear about the lifting of the ban when I was still undergoing my medicals in the U.S.A in July 1998.

When I finally returned from my first international trip, I was happy to go back and resume my job at NUPENG but the good rapport I had cultivated with General Abubakar continued until he bowed out as the Head of State in May 1999. In and out of office, I found the General to be a good and passionate gentleman officer.

Babagana Kingibe/Kokori — Post June 12

In this my testament of the June 12 Saga, Baba Gana Kingibe remained one of the principal actors of the whole episode. He was the presidential running mate of Bashorun MKO Abiola in a bonafide election which they both clearly won. So he was bonafide Vice President-elect, awaiting inauguration in 1993. Kingibe; flamboyant, fascinating, and even charismatic; he hugs the limelight. He loves power in all its ramification but yet not ready to suffer a day's deprivation to achieve this power which he so much craves for. He loves the good life but is not ready to make the minutest sacrifice. Yes, that is Kingibe. He loves the crowd hailing and chanting, "Sai Baba, Sai Baba."

The turning point in my well-cherished relationship with Baba started when General Sani Abacha sacked the lame duck interim government of Chief Earnest Shonekan in November 1993. Without any qualms, the man just jumped ship to abandon his principal, MKO Abiola and all of us who were in the vanguard of the June 12 struggle. It was unbelievable but that was the bitter truth, so Kingibe was appointed the Foreign Affairs Minister and a Member of the Provisional Ruling Council of the pariah government of General Abacha. This singular incident temporarily demoralized the June 12 crowd until we gained bigger momentum again. As earlier recorded in this book, my great love and respect for this brilliant and lovable Kanuri son soon whittled down. Until I went and came out of prison. On my return from Abacha's gulag in June 1998, the limelight was focused on me again. Goodwill messages poured from across the country and the world to herald my release and other prominent detainees. In all this, there was not a whimper from Kingibe. Not even a card from him. Once or twice, we met in the plane on the Abuja-Lagos route. That was all, until a day in December 2006.

The Democratic People's Party (DPP) was inaugurated about 20th December, 2006 in Abuja and I was elected the Deputy National Chairman of the party. General Jeremiah Useni was elected as the National Chairman. I was convinced to join the party by Chief Great Ogboru. In fact, the main purpose of our joining the party was to promote the gubernatorial ambition of Ogboru, a very popular candidate of the Delta people. The next morning after the inauguration, we ran into Baba Gana Kingibe at the lobby of the Transcorp Hilton Hotel as we were checking out. As I came down from the lift, I noticed Great Ogboru discussing with a gentleman, whom I could not recognize immediately since they were both backing me. Then I noticed Great pointing to me and saying, "Here comes Frank Kokori." It was then that I noticed the gentleman with

him was Baba Gana. He moved towards me and we both embraced warmly. Then Kingibe, the perfect spook, immediately told me the purpose of my trip to Abuja even before I could say anything. “Frank,” he said, “why are you wasting your time in a party like the DPP?” He said the party will not fly. Then we had some light talk. However, Baba would not allow me go with Ogboru to the airport. I pleaded with him that we had a flight to catch to Lagos. No way, Baba insisted that I must go with him to his house to spend the day, saying we had much to talk about. As usual, in his boisterous way, he was able to convince me to join him at his Abuja residence. I had to abandon my trip to Lagos and appeal to Great Ogboru to excuse me so as to be with my mercurial friend, Babagana, even though we both had some important issues to address in Lagos. We then drove to Baba’s house, where we immediately settled down for business. We were both happy to have this special time together to enable us pour out our hearts. Baba took me to a small parlour where we both locked ourselves in. We discussed the past and present. I asked why he decided to ditch the struggle at the period he did, as his action caused us a lot of shock and embarrassment. He gave some of his usual reasons which I already knew. He said that at a stage, MKO was carrying on without carrying him along. He went on rambling on the reasons why he had to jump ship, but in all this, I was not impressed a bit and I told him so. Then he came out frankly to say, “Frank I am not like you, a core activist,” he continued. “Look Frank, I have three wives.” That is, his two Nigerian wives whom I know, and another German. He said he had so many responsibilities to attach to, that we should not be too hard on him. I have always had a soft spot for Baba and I was glad he opened up to me. I noticed that Baba was passing through some hard times. To me, hard times are part of the hazards of my trade, but to Baba “government pikin”, it was like passing through hell, no matter how brief it may be. We

then moved to the area of politics. He revealed to me that he was a card, carrying member of the All Nigeria Peoples Party, ANPP. In fact, during that period, his junior wife, Ireti, was the candidate of the ANPP for the Abuja senatorial district. But she lost with a very slim margin to the People Democratic Party PDP candidate. Then he told me that after the nomination of Alhaji Umoru Musa Yar'Adua as the PDP presidential candidate, he had become a sympathizer of the PDP for the sake of Musa Yar'Adua because of his affinity with the candidate. He added that Musa Yar'Adua would be visiting him that night, that he would introduce him to me. On that note, he drove me back to my hotel. Somehow I slept off. And Baba never called that night. But when we met the next morning, he confirmed that Umoru Yar'Adua came visiting as promised. He reaffirmed to me that since Yar'Adua had become a candidate, he had switched his political alliance to the PDP.

The 2007 presidential election came up in May 2007. And Umoru Musa Yar'Adua of the PDP was elected as President and Commander-in-Chief of the Federal Republic. This became a new dawn for Baba Gana again. Baba Gana Kingibe became the first major appointee of the Yar'Adua administration, when he was appointed the Secretary to the Federal Government of the Federation of Nigeria, SGF; a very important and powerful position in government. Now Baba has bounced back from the lowly valley to the pinnacle of power. Between June - July 2007, Baba was operating as the de-facto "Prime Minister" of the country. With no ministers yet appointed by the government, Baba was everything.

Labour Logjam

As OBJ was exiting government in May 2007, he left behind a Labour logjam for his predecessor, Yar'adua. He had raised the price of premium motor spirit (Petrol) from ₦65.00 to ₦75.00

and raised the Value Added Tax (VAT) from five to ten percent. This was a serious booby trap for the incoming government. Thus, immediately Yar'Adua took over the helm of government, he was confronted with these grave matters. The Labour movements were on red alert and the Nigerian masses were up in arms against the new government. At that period, the Ministry of Labour was comatose, with no minister and no experienced Permanent Secretary. As for the Nigeria Labour Congress, a new leadership had just emerged. Abdulkadir Oman has just taken over from Adams Oshiomole's regime. Both the NLC and the TUC, the two big Labour centres issued a fourteen-day ultimatum to government to revert to status quo. Thus, the new president and Kingibe, his new SGF, found themselves in a quagmire. At this point, Baba remembered his old friend and he immediately invited me to Abuja for a major rescue operation. Within twelve hours, I was in Abuja. Kingibe's office in Abuja had become a Mecca. There were those lobbying to grab juicy federal appointments, all lining to have a meeting with Kingibe. Baba has bounced back after the lean eight years of the Obasanjo regime where he was condemned to the cooler. Apart from these hustlers, there were also big government functionaries like heads of MDC's like customs, immigrations, NNPC and others, waiting to have his attention; some lobbying to retain their positions and others waiting to get approval for sundry matters under their watch. That was the state of affairs in the country when I arrived the SGF office about five days after the take off of that regime.

Babagana and I had a mutual younger friend, Ogana Lukpata from Cross River State. This young man was about thirty years old then. He was elected the National Legal Adviser of the SDP at inception in 1990 and since then have related well with both of us. As I was leaving Lagos, I contacted him to join me at Abuja. On arrival, we both proceeded to the SGF office in the government secretariat

complex. There we met our old friend, Baba, operating imperially as boss of the entire federal bureaucracy, in the absence of any minister in the entire federal machinery. Baba was back, rising from the lowliest of valley to the opulence of state power. We met Baba and in his usual boisterous way, he received us warmly, especially when he had a very difficult task to engage me in. Immediately, we both retired to an inner office, leaving his huge crowd of visitors behind. The fourteen days ultimatum clamped on the government by Labour was gradually tickling away. The situation was critical. The SGF immediately tabled the matter of the Labour crisis before me and asked for the way forward. Then and there I asked that I should be given a few hours to consult my constituency. Thus, I left for the Labour house in the central business district of Abuja. I had my consultation with the President and General Secretary of Congress, Abdulraman Omar and John Odah respectively. I pleaded with them that later in the day I will request the SGF to arrange a meeting between government and Labour. As I finished with the NIL, I put a call to the president of the Trade Union Congress, Peter Esele, who was based in Lagos. He was procrastinating because of transport logistic problem but I pleaded with him to see the matter as a national call to duty. In my interactions with the two Labour centres, I tried to convince them to be soft on this new government, since the problem was fostered on them by the immediate former government of President Olusegun Obasanjo. For the first preliminary meetings, I convinced the NLC President and the General Secretary to come with me to the SGF towers for the meeting, and I moderated that meeting. Subsequent meetings followed when the TUC team arrived from Lagos. Throughout the two weeks painstaking negotiations, Baba Gana, the new SGF, led the Federal Government team. After sometime, I decided to remain in my hotel room where I continued to use my phone to walk the

talk. I would stay awake throughout the night, receiving calls from both parties seeking my intervention when negotiations were not smooth sailing. The whole country was on its toes as time was tickling minute by minute towards the fourteen days ultimatum.

Finally, just before the last day of the 14 days deadline, to the surprise of the Labour unions and in fact, the entire country, President Yar'Adua conceded to all Labour demands. The pump price of petroleum was reverted to sixty-five naira, while the VAT was reverted from the OBJ ten percent to the old five percent. It was victory for the country. No victor, no vanquished.

In all these, Kingibe shielded the president from everybody, even I, who was the motivator behind the whole bargaining. At a stage, I requested that I would like to pay a curtesy visit to him, but Baba gave some incoherent excuses that prevented me from having a one-on-one meeting with the president.

Now, the first baptism of fire of the new Government has been peacefully navigated to the satisfaction of all. I managed to cover my hotel and travelling bills from my lean resources and the miserable stipend which Baba occasionally gave to me, promising to do the right thing after the resolution of the crisis when we shall both meet with Mr. President. As usual, Baba never fulfilled his promise to me till date. At a stage during Baba's days of power and opulence, he stopped picking up calls from me and Ogana Lukpata. To say the least, I was pissed off. I spent three weeks of my time in Abuja during the first one month of the Umoru Musa Yar'Adua regime. I was with them through thick and thin. Sometimes, at 3am, Baba would call me up to work the lines with my comrades. But at the end of the day, the man just took all the glory from Mr. President. But there is this constant verdict of nature. Everything that has a beginning will surely have an end. It could be a glorious end or a disgraceful and humiliating end. Thus, sometime in late 2009, Baba met his

waterloo. The party was over. Baba was kicked out of his Olypian height at the SGF towers in Abuja in a most dramatic fashion by his principal, President Yar'Adua. Now, Baba's phone line that was having the highest traffic suddenly went silent. And he now craves for calls, no matter how inconsequential such calls may be. That is the bane of the Nigerian overfed and over-pampered political elites; once they get to the top, the rest of the society becomes their toy. They never learn. This sequence may continue for a long time, until maybe when a people's government who genuinely win elections and who will know that every public servant is there at the pleasure of the people and not for self-aggrandizement, is elected. I pray Baba will one day rise again as usual, but I hope he has learnt some bitter lessons from the foibles of life.

I and Goodluck Jonathan

I see President Jonathan as one of the luckiest men God ever created. Look at the type of dogged struggles great leaders like Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (Zik) and Chief Obafemi Awolowo put in throughout their adult life to head the government of Nigeria. These were men of vision and great character, but in all, their efforts ended in smoke. Nnamdi Azikiwe became a president, but a mere ceremonial president, while the real power remained with his Prime Minister, Alhaji Abubakar Tafewa Balewa.

Then came a young village boy, who studied locally from primary school to university level, all around his immediate local vicinity, where through hardwork, he bagged a doctorate degree (Ph.D) from one of Nigeria's prestigious university and with the hand of God in his life, he rose from the humble beginning of a teacher through being a Deputy Governor, Governor, Vice President and President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Force of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

At a stage when Jonathan was to be cheated out of his rightful position to occupy the presidency of Nigeria by a faceless cabal, the entire civil society of Nigeria and all men of goodwill across the country rose in unison under a common banner to fight for him to occupy his rightful position. Another intriguing aspect about this man is that he hails from one of the most neglected and forgotten minority tribes of Nigeria; an Ijaw of the Niger Delta region. So it was not a surprise that there was so much hope and excitement across the Niger Delta in particular when he finally ascended the presidency.

I was one of those Niger Deltans who continuously prayed silently for this to happen in my lifetime. But this is not to say that my belief that President Umoru Musa Yar'Adua was one of the finest presidents that ever governed this country was ever diminished. Yes, till date, I still believed that if not for the health challenges, Yar'Adua was one of the best. His sincerity was never in doubt in all his actions. Remember the prompt manner with which he ordered the implementation of court judgments that installed Governors Adams Oshiomole of Edo State; Rotimi Amaechi of Rivers State; Peter Obi of Anambra and handled other issues that required righteousness without subjecting the country to unnecessary tensions. What about the declaration of his assets to the Code of Conduct Bureau without any prompting by the public, thus making him the only Nigerian President/Head of Government to have voluntarily subjected himself to such scrutiny. This man, Yar'Adua could have hidden under the immense and ubiquitous powers of the Nigerian presidency and toed the path of his predecessors. Military dictators are known for their highhandedness and outright impunity. His predecessor, President Obasanjo, who was also democratically elected like him was noted for treating court rulings with levity and in some occasions, outrightly disregarding them

like the military Heads of State. But Yar'Adua was different. He was simple and frugal. He was slow in taking actions which I believe was not unconnected to his many health challenges. I wished he had come into office with good health and completed his tenure, I believe he would have served this country far, far better than most leaders that have been privileged to lead this country. I never met him as a President.

Jonathan's ascendancy of the Nigeria presidency was one of the mysteries of modern Nigeria. It was God's divine intervention in telling the Nigerian oligarchy and the three major tribes; Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and the Igbo that Nigeria belongs to all. For those of us who belong to the "minority tribes" of the country, it was a dream come true. At least, the jinx of the presidency only coming from the majority tribes was broken. Thus, my eagerness to meet and interact with him was understandable. Immediately he was formally confirmed as Acting President, through the instrumentality of the 'doctrine of necessity' by the National Assembly, I was lucky to be one of the first persons to have a private meeting with him. That meeting was facilitated by Mr. Odein Ajumogobia, who was then the Minister of State for petroleum resources. It was a Saturday afternoon at the Aguda house which was the official residence of the Vice President. This was some few days after critically sick President Yar'Adua had been ferried into the State House from Saudi Arabia by the so-called cabal, without his knowledge. Jonathan was calm, still relishing his new status as Acting President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. There were just few visitors waiting to see him. During my wait, I recall the then Anglican Primate of Nigeria, Right Reverend Akinola, Governor Segun Oni of Ekiti State, and Governor Bukola Saraki, then the chairman of the Nigeria Governor's Forum, among others, coming in to see him. I saw Jonathan as a man who does not betray his mien publicly. At least, he was not

the boisterous type. When it got to my turn, I was escorted in by Mr. Ajumogobia, who after the usual curtsies, left both of us alone to discuss. He told me he was just being recruited as an Assistant Director in the organisation when they heard about my resignation as the pioneer Administrative Secretary of the commission. Then I told him the purpose of my visit. I told him about the vacant position of the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) of which I am interested. I told him of how at a time in 1998, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, the head of state then, offered me the position, and my reluctance at the time. In his response, he told me that he has not made up his mind and added that he would surely consider me along with other candidates since I was also eminently qualified for the job. On a parting note, he noted that if I was not lucky to gain the chairmanship slot, he thinks I would be appropriate for the position of a national commissioner in the commission. Jocularly, he added that a person like me will be very good at putting any chairman on his toes at all times. We both laughed over it, shook hands and I left him in high spirits. As I was leaving with Mr. Ajumogobia, I narrated to him what transpired between me and the Acting President, he was happy and encouraged me to be hopeful. However, at the end of it all, my hopes ended in smoke.

Thinking Aloud...

Today, we have a rich country inhabited by very poor people. A paradox caused by an impervious leadership that has evolved over the years. We have a situation where the economic indices dished out by government agencies like the Federal Office of Statistics, The Central Bank, and the Ministry of Finance continually publish positive figures of developmental growth while the people groan under the worst type of deprivations seen anywhere in the world.

How do we reconcile a seven percent gross domestic product (GDP) growth recorded annually by the federal office of statistic to the lowly standard of living of the people?

In any case, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) ranked Nigeria number 36 in the world on account of our GDP estimated at about 275 billion dollars in 2012. As big and encouraging as such figures sound, yet the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ranked Nigeria number 157, on account of Human Development Index in the same year 2012. And by this ranking, we are below such poor countries like Ghana, Cameroon, Angola, etc. Now how did we find ourselves in such a hopeless situation? The answer is obvious: WASTAGES.

Overview of our Wastages

- *Frequent frivolous overseas trips*

Nigeria's government functionaries from the Federal Government, State and Local Government are all addicted to frequent frivolous international trips, often with large delegations, traveling the world in quest of seeking foreign "investors" and in the process, gulping millions of dollars from the commonwealth of our people.

- *Medical tourism*

Medical tourisms are rampant among public servants. The interesting thing about this addiction is that it is only available to senior government functionaries and these huge costs of foreign medical treatments are borne by the state; a big drain pipe on our commonwealth.

- ***Sponsoring of “merit” awards***

Nigeria has now become a “big factory” of worthless “merit” awards. Looking through most of these awards which are highly cherished by some state governors and other men of “power” in government, we can see that majority of them are worthless. For example, what do we make of “Most Outstanding Governor of the Year’s awards by six different national media organizations and won by different state governors at the same period? That is, every media outfit with her own most outstanding governor of the year. It is all a fraud. An arranged award. In all these, the state treasuries always bear the brunt.

- ***Frivolous praise advertorials***

Pick a Nigerian newspaper today, and what we see are various advertorials, self-sponsored by government functionaries for birthdays, awards, etc. Okay, you are free to advertise and congratulate yourselves on your birthdays. But why must government agencies under our governors waste our funds by sponsoring their birthdays. A man celebrating a birthday anniversary at 40, 50, 60, 70 or 80, is understandable. But why 41, 43, 44, 47, 51, 57? And with government funds! And immediately these government functionaries leave office, you no longer hear of birthday adverts and birthday jamborees.

- ***Office of First Ladies***

What does this stand for? What type of country are we leaving behind for our children? Why do we glorify ourselves in vanities of life?

We are sinking our country!

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FRANK KOKORI:

THE STRUGGLE FOR JUNE 12

Kokori: *The Struggle for June 12* is the candid account of Chief Frank Kokori, former NUPENG General Secretary, of the roles he and other heroes played in the quest to revalidate the June 12, 1993 presidential election, which was annulled by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, the Military Head of State at the time. This book exposes, in depth, the hidden facts about the thrilling and chilling events before, during and after the election, up till the incarceration of Chief Kokori as well as the aftermath of the political brouhaha and debilitating experience.

Kokori: The Struggle for June 12 also showcases the gladiators who helped attain democratic governance in Nigeria, but have been neglected in the present political dispensation.

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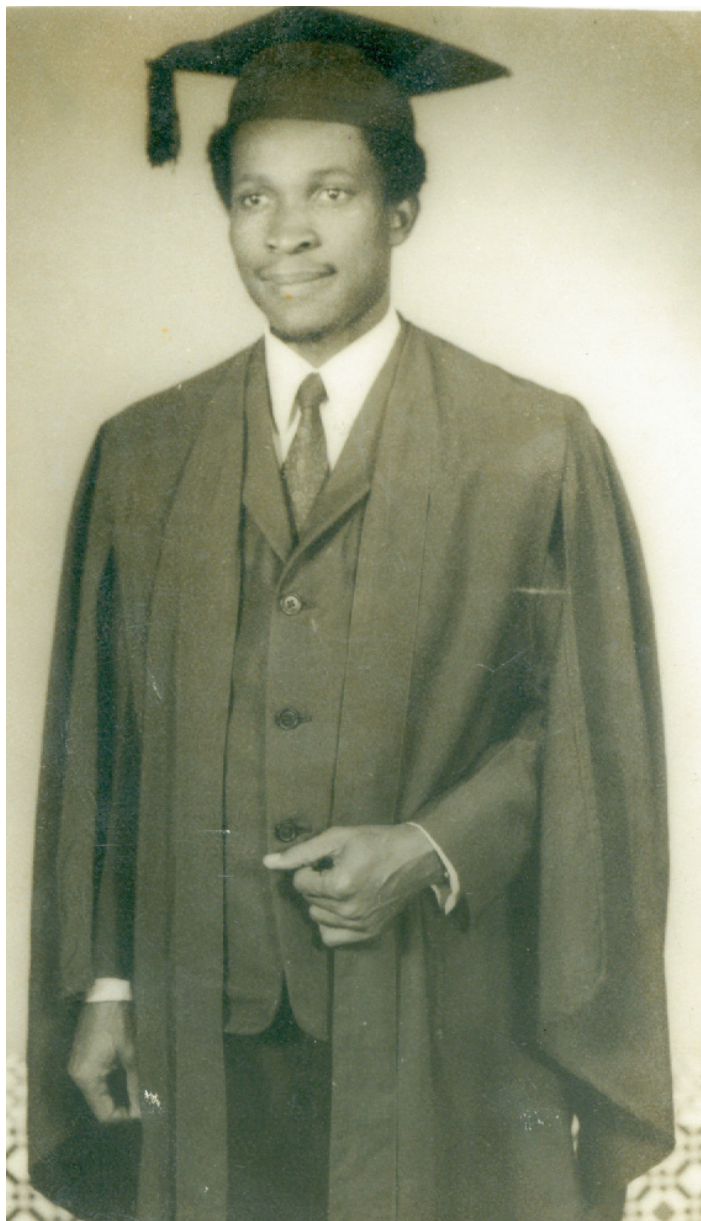
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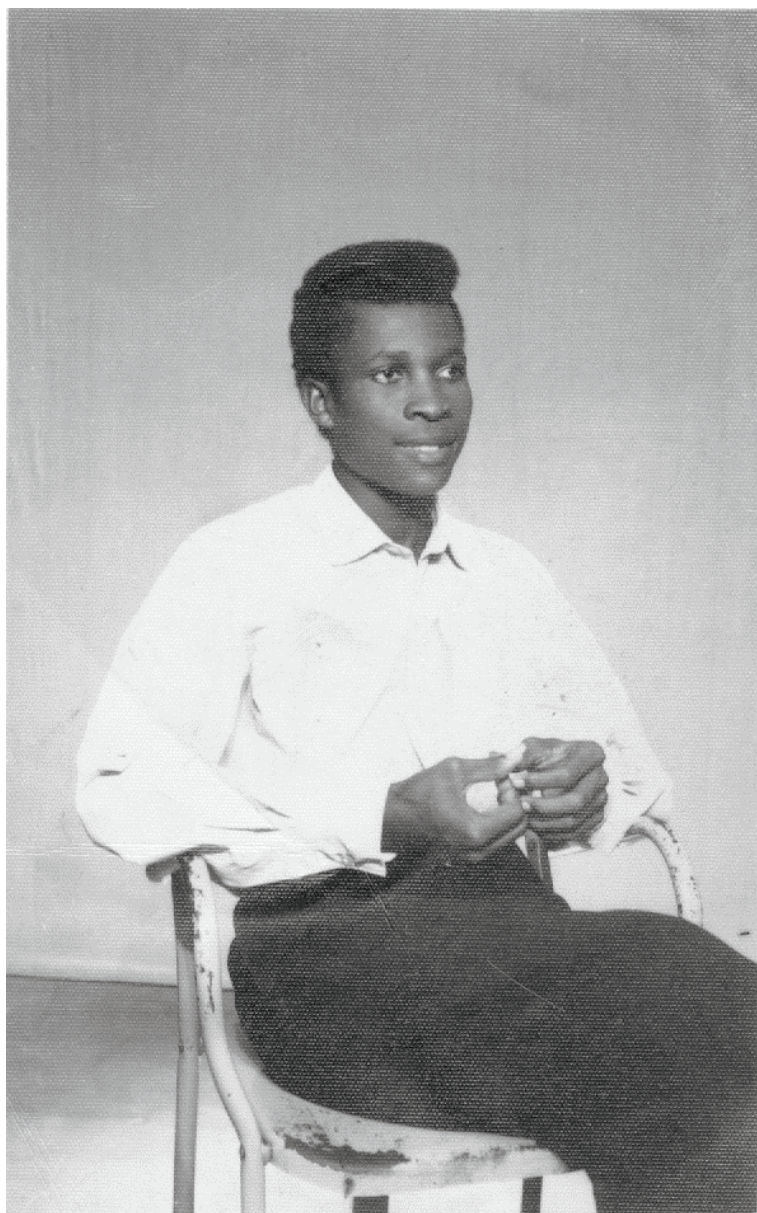
Early days: Kokori with an older cousin in 1958



Madam Rose Otoubiere Ogomugo Kokori, 1918-1988



Matriculation at University of Ibadan



A keen look at the future



Chief Frank Ovie Kokori, 1984



With Esther Kokori, 1967



So close: Kokori with wife



With family, 1984



Engnr. Ade Thompson (the good Samaritan) and his wife, with Onome Kokori sitting in front, 1999



From Left: Gov. Bola Tinubu; NLC President Adams Oshiomole; Frank Kokori; Gov. Segun Osoba, at Kokori's send-off reception, Dec. 1999



With wife, during NUPENG send-off, December 1999



Frank (2nd right), wife, (3rd right), Milton Dabibi (6th right), John Odah (1st right), at Hague, Netherlands, 1998



Delivering a lecture at Yaba College of Technology, 1999



With late Kojo Agamene (the lion of Amasoma), President, NUPENG,
during the struggle



With Great Ogboru, 2007



At a summit in Tripoli, 1982



With Babagana Kingibe, 2012



Tears for a mother, November 1988



Kokori at one of the May Day rallies



With S. A. Dada, President of NUPENG, at Petroleum Committee Meeting of ILO, Geneva, 1986



The eldest of the Kokori children, late Chief Samuel Kokori (LLB Durham), First Urhobo man to gain an LLB Decree in 1952



Frank Kokori Family

Sitting from Left: Frank, Onome, Esther. Back from left: Frank Jnr., Aghogho, Efe and Cordelia, 1992



Arriving Rotterdam with international Labour colleagues, 1983



Meditating in the heat of a Labour crisis, 1993



With his deputies, Okougbo and Akilaja, in an animated discussion,
1993



With Ambassador Jubrin Chinade at the Hague



Before a June 12 talk



From Left: Femi Falana, Pa. Abraham Adesanya and Esther Kokori,
celebrating Kokori's birthday



From Left: Pa. Abraham Adesanya, Esther Kokori, Gani Fawehinmi, at
Kokori's birthday



At Amnesty International, campaigning for democracy at A.I. Office, London, 1997. Second from left is Mrs Milton Dabibi, first left is John Odah



With coursemates at Postgraduate School, The Hague, 1984



With Dr. Adegbeyeni, celebrating freedom, December 1999



From Left: Esther; Frank; Gov. Marwa of Lagos State; Jon Dubre,^{1ST}
NUPENG President, at NUPENG Conference of Liberation, 1998